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ABSTRACT

This guide is designed for teachers who wish to teach about Marco Polo and his travels to China during the 13th century. The guide was originally developed for use with a television series about Marco Polo; it can successfully be used independent of the series, however. A prologue gives the reader a basic introduction to what is known of the life of Marco Polo. The first part of the text provides the larger historical context for Polo's journey, from European, Mongol, and Chinese perspectives. The second part of the text divides Marco Polo's observations of China into four separate chapters organized around different topics. These topics are Kublai Khan; places and cities; people, culture, and technology; and conflicts within and without. An epilogue briefly describes what happened to East-West contact after Marco Polo. Six appendices provide a synopsis of the television mini-series, a cast of characters, a timeline, map, classroom exercises, and a 10-item bibliography. (DB)

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DISCOVERING MARCO POLO

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A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

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THE CHINA PROJECT/SPICE
THE STANFORD PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION

DISCOVERING MARCO POLO:

A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

The China Project (BAYCEP)

Stanford Program on International
and Cross-Cultural Education

Stanford University

Das iſt der edel Ritter· Marcho polo von
Venedig der groſt landtfarer· der uns beſchreibt die groſſen wunder der welt
die er ſelber geſehen hat· Von dem auffgang
bis zu dem nydergāg der ſunnē· der gleychē vor nicht mer gehört ſeyn

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the Center for East Asian Studies and
the Center for Research in International Studies,
Stanford University

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INTRODUCTION

Dr. David L. Grossman

Stanford Program on International
and Cross-Cultural Education

It has the ring of a science fiction story:

> A travel-weary stranger returns to his home city after nearly a 25-year absence. At first unrecognized by family and friends, he tells an amazing tale of a visit to a distant world of unimaginable wealth, population, and power. He describes technological achievements beyond the conception of his audience. However, rather than being taken seriously, he is jeered and laughed at. People call him the "Man of Millions," mocking the scale of things he describes as having seen. Asked on his deathbed to recant, he replies that he has only told one half of what he actually saw. He dies in relative obscurity, unnoted by the foremost scholars and authors of his age.

But this is not Strangers in a Strange Land, or even Gulliver's Travels. It is a brief glimpse of the story of Marco Polo. As our little vignette suggests, it is a story of mythic proportions, a kind of Lost Horizons where the central characters are authentic historical figures. In its scope and drama, it is a Hollywood mogul's dream, rivalling Biblical epics with their casts of thousands. To bring this story to the screen in a ten-hour television miniseries was a significant challenge. For one thing, the makers of the miniseries decided to abandon the Hollywood sets and go on location. This meant not only transporting film crews from place to place, but also trying to recreate four very different "worlds" -- Italy, the Middle East, the vast and varied lands of Central Asia, and finally, China. By the same token, actors and technicians were drawn from these four worlds. Even in a global age it is difficult to reconstruct Marco Polo's journey, and the very making of the film is an unusual story of cross-cultural effort and cooperation. As such, it must be warmly applauded.

Marco Polo: Legend and History

However, the same aura of romance and legend that surrounds this Medieval Venetian traveller and attracted the television scriptwriters*, serves to obscure Marco Polo, the historical figure, from Marco Polo, the legend. This is compounded by the fact that there are surprisingly few facts regarding Marco Polo's life. Even after a reading of his book, which we know today as The Travels of Marco Polo, we can only look between the lines for clues as to the character, interests, prejudices of this Medieval Venetian traveller. We have written this guide with the intent of helping the teacher and/or consumer of Marco Polo's story -- in whatever form -- to better distinguish between fact and fantasy. We think that the reader -- though perhaps disappointed to find that there is no evidence that Marco brought the idea of noodles (and hence spaghetti) back to Italy -- will find the historical story more compelling and more important than the legendary version. For it is, at its base, a profound story of East-West relations from which we can draw insights even for today's world. It is in this sense that we have entitled the guide Discovering Marco Polo. And it is our hope that in "discovering" Marco Polo, we will discover something about ourselves and our own perceptions of Asia. But first, let us give you a few clues to a better understanding of Marco Polo.

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*The script has been printed in the form of a novel. See Keith Miles and David Butler, Marco Polo (New York: Dell), 1982.

Perceptions/Misperceptions

You might be surprised to find that many of our images and stereotypes, particularly those of the "exotic East," are traceable back to Marco Polo. So, the first key to unlocking Marco Polo lies in confronting the issue of perception and misperception. Polo, like all travellers, Medieval or modern, carried a lot of "cultural baggage" along with his more conventional luggage. To use an analogy, our own culture provides us with a set of glasses, i.e., lenses, though which we observe our world. Because these lenses help us to navigate in a particular cultural environment, they may be less useful as we enter new environments, because they shape and color what we see. If we adapt our "lenses" to a different environment, we may also find that it alters our vision of our own culture. To be sure, this is a description of a form of ethnocentrism. But it acknowledges that while ethnocentrism is a product of growing up within a limited cultural environment, it also helps us to function within that environment.

So it is important to note that Marco Polo viewed Asia through the lenses of a Venetian raised in the thirteenth century. Most treatments of Marco Polo make the reader aware of this without exploring a second and equally important point. Marco Polo left Venice when he was only seventeen years old. Thus, being relatively impressionable, his ideas of the world were in part formed by what he saw and learned on his travels through Asia. Further, as soon as he arrived in China, he was taken into the service of the great

Mongol ruler, Kublai Khan, and for the duration of his stay was a privileged member of the Mongol ruling class. Thus, it was not long before Marco was looking at the world through what were basically a double set of lenses -- European and Mongol. The fact that Marco Polo was able to make this transition to a second set of lenses is remarkable in itself. But it does not remove the fact that it very much constrained his vision of China -- the Chinese and things Chinese. As an official of the Mongol court, he spoke fluent Mongolian, but no Chinese! Thus, it is not so surprising that his understanding of China is often superficial.

This lead us to a related point. It was not only ethnocentrism that limited Marco Polo's view of China, but also a corollary problem which is sometimes called tempocentrism. This means that just as we can be culture-bound, we can be "time-bound." For instance, when Marco Polo came to China, it was the most advanced --culturally, economically and technologically -- place in the world. However, it had just been overrun by the Mongols, a people of nomadic origin with a very different culture from that of the Chinese. Marco Polo had almost no knowledge of this historical background and so attributed much of the greatness he saw in China to the rule of the Mongols. Thus, somewhat ironically, the same events that gave Marco Polo access to China in the first place, i.e., the Mongol conquest, partially obscured his vision of China and limited his understanding of Chinese tradition.

The constraints that these all too human limitations put on Polo's description of the world he saw can be frustrating to the modern reader. For having written what is supposedly one of the great, if not the greatest, work of thirteenth century Europe, he is not a very good historian, at least in modern terms. He mixes hearsay, fact, and legend in a stream that is a goldmine for scholarly speculation. Worse yet, there is no real chronology to the Travels, and dates must be extrapolated. He is also a very poor geographer, as he precedes the great cartographers of Europe. For instance, when travelling in the Indian Ocean, he was convinced that he had travelled farther north than the Pole Star because he could no longer see it.

Before we judge Polo too harshly, however, we must recognize that, in some sense, his limitations are our limitations. Polo was after all a Westerner, and it is to the West he is a hero. In the history of the Chinese empire, the longest continuous empire in human history, Marco Polo is but a small footnote. The Travels of Marco Polo was not even translated into

Chinese until the twentieth century. Coming from an isolated Europe, Polo had an excuse for not understanding that great civilization which, both culturally and technologically, was predominant in the world from at least the fall of Rome until the eighteenth century. To what extent does our own tempocentrism prevent us from seeing the ascendancy of Western civilization and technology as a relatively recent and brief moment in history? How many contemporary visitors to China -- be they tourists, government officials, businessmen -- have even a rudimentary grasp of the Chinese language?

The Significance of Marco Polo

What then is the significance of Marco Polo? In our history texts, we continually use the term "discovery" in regards to Europe's movement into Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Thus, Marco Polo "discovers" China, and therein, we are led to believe, lies his significance. This is a Eurocentric view of history, the same kind of conceptual framework that leads to a TV series called Civilization which makes no mention of China. Marco Polo did not "discover" China any more than Columbus discovered the Americas. The significance in these events lies in the fact that they initiated a new set of relationships between very different peoples in very different parts of the world. World history need not be reduced to European contact, discovery and expansion, but unfortunately it often is.

This is not to denigrate the significance of either Marco Polo or Columbus. Rather it is to put them in their truly global context. Both "discoveries" are part of a linked set of complex events that did lead to western expansion throughout the world. (Columbus is said to have carried an annotated copy of The Travels of Marco Polo on his first voyage to the Americas.) But those large unknown spaces on the maps were neither uninhabited, nor without their own cultural history.

What Marco Polo brought back to Europe was not spaghetti, but an idea; an idea that took some time to germinate, but which ultimately changed world history. It was the notion of a new world, more advanced and prosperous than anything known. So remarkable was this world that he had to censor his description in the hopes that his contemporaries would believe him. Most didn't; they laughed. But the utopian image remained, and motivated others to search for this new and better world.

A Note on the Television Miniseries

A word needs to be said about the television miniseries which provided the occasion for production of this guide. As a joint Italian-Chinese production for an American, perhaps Western, audience, it is truly a global event. The difficulties encountered in such an effort should never be minimized. However, the viewer should prepare themselves for the fact that like Marco Polo's book, the television miniseries is tailored toward reaching a particular audience. As is the case with Hollywood, romance often replaces history. Were we to take a narrow scholarly viewpoint, we might be very critical of the television version of Marco Polo. We have no idea how Marco Polo himself might react, but we can be sure that Rusticello, the writer of Medieval romances who took down Polo's story, would be sympathetic. Rather than viewing the content of the televised version as a problem, we would like you to consider it as an opportunity -- an opportunity to deal with the question of why certain aspects of the story are emphasized and others are omitted. (For some suggestions in this regard, see Appendix D, Activities 4 and 5.) From this perspective, the TV miniseries provides us with an additional occasion for some self-examination.

The Guide

The guide itself tries to deal with some of the issues raised above. However, its emphasis is on China, and the treatment of other areas of Asia visited by the Polos is limited. The Prologue gives the reader a basic introduction to the life of Polo as we know it. Then in Part I it provides the larger historical context for Polo's journey, from European, Mongol and Chinese perspectives. The second part of the text divides Marco Polo's observations of China into four separate chapters organized around different topics. It also includes a section on what Polo did not mention. The Epilogue briefly describes what happened to East-West contact after Marco Polo. In the Appendices, we have provided a synopsis of the television miniseries, a cast of characters, a timeline, maps, classroom exercises and bibliography to accompany the text.

This guide was prepared under considerable time pressure to coincide with the television series, but it was always our intention to create a guide that could be used independently of the series as well, for the general purpose of improving teaching about Marco Polo.

DISCOVERING MARCO POLO

text by

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PROLOGUE

THE STORY OF MARCO POLO

Marco Polo. It is one of those names -- like Robin Hood or King Arthur -- which everyone seems to have heard of somewhere or another even if they can't place it in a specific context. Most of us vaguely associate the name with tales of travel and adventure, with spaghetti and with China. If pressed, we might find it hard to say whether Marco Polo was an actual historical person, a character from a story, or a combination of both! As it turns out, Marco Polo is very much a historical figure, and a significant one at that! For while he probably didn't introduce spaghetti into Italian cuisine, he did travel extensively in China and his account of these travels provided the West with its first direct glimpse of the ancient and -- to the people of Europe -- unknown culture and civilization of China. But...who was Marco Polo?

Marco was born in Venice, Italy in 1254. His family belonged to the Venetian nobility, but they also took part in the trading activities that were the life of the Italian maritime cities of the thirteenth century. In fact, the Polo family not only traded in Venice, but also had a large trading emporium in Constantinople. It was from this emporium that in 1260 Marco Polo's father, Niccolo, and his uncle, Matteo, set out on what was to be a short business trip into the region along the Volga River which was now the westernmost part of the Mongol empire. However, it would be nine years before Marco Polo saw his father and uncle again.

The Elder Polos: The First Journey to China

Niccolo and Matteo arrived safely at the court of the Mongol prince of the Volga region and there they made a lucrative exchange of gems and other precious items. They then headed towards Bokhara (in present-day Turkey), a busy, cosmopolitan trading center. At this point, their route was blocked in all directions by feuding Mongol armies and the Polos were forced to remain in Bokhara for three years. During this time they learned Persian and Turkish, as well as a great deal about the customs and peoples of Central Asia, a knowledge they would later pass on to Marco Polo.

As luck would have it, in Bokhara the Polos met a group of Mongol imperial envoys who were on their way to the court of Kublai Khan, which lay thousands of miles away in China. These envoys carried with them special tablets of gold and silver which marked them as imperial envoys and which were respected by everyone in the empire. As a result, they could travel even through war-torn areas in relative safety. Knowing that Kublai had not met many Europeans, the envoys invited the Polos to accompany them to China. Having no other way to get out of Bokhara, the Polos accepted.

We do not know the exact itinerary followed by the Polos and their escorts. All we know for sure is that when they arrived, Kublai was delighted and plied his European visitors with questions and gifts. When the Polos finally left China in 1266, Kublai made them promise to return and entrusted them with a letter to the Pope requesting, among other things, that 100 of his best scholar-priests be sent to China to teach. Protected by the Khan's imperial tablets, the Polos safely retraced their steps and arrived back in Venice in 1269.

Upon their return home, the elder Polos found that much had happened during their absence from Venice. Niccolo's wife -- Marco Polo's mother -- had died several years before, leaving her son in the care of relatives. As for Marco, he had grown up to be a strapping young man of fifteen, eager and curious about the elder Polos' travels in the far away lands of Asia. Niccolo told his son that he could come along on their next journey to China, for they had promised Kublai that they would return. But first, they had to deliver the Khan's letter to the Pope.

However, there was no Pope. Pope Clement had died the year before and the College of Cardinals was having a difficult time deciding on a successor. The Polos waited for two years but finally they grew impatient and decided to return to China even if it meant going empty-handed. In 1271, the three Polos -- Niccolo, Matteo, and Marco -- left Venice, travelling first to Jerusalem where they obtained the bottle of sacred oil from the Holy Sepulchre which they had promised Kublai. While they were in Jerusalem, they suddenly learned that their friend, Teobaldo Visconti, previously Papal Legate in the Holy Land, had been elected Pope. Teobaldo, now Gregory X, immediately appointed the Polos official papal envoys to the Khan. However, he was unable to find 100 priests willing to go to China and so sent only two, Friar Nicholas and Friar William, both of whom soon lost heart and returned home leaving the Polos to travel on alone. Evidently the two cowardly friars never reported back to Pope Gregory who assumed they were on their way to China together with the Polos!

The journey overland to China took the Polos over an incredible stretch of territory, ranging from hot, torrid deserts to high, freezing cold mountains. They travelled through the inhospitable, bandit-infested deserts of Persia; the lush, beautiful country of what is today Afghanistan; the seemingly impassable and very forbidding Pamir mountains; the oases-dotted lands along the ancient Silk Road; the vast stretches of the Gobi Desert; and finally into the dry and often dusty plains of Northern China. (See Appendices C and D for itinerary and maps.)

Altogether, the journey took them over three and a half years and the difficulties they encountered have been verified in full by twentieth century travellers who -- with far better equipment than the Polos had -- have tried to retrace the steps of those thirteenth century travellers.

In the spring of 1275, forty days journey from Kublai's court, the Polos were met by richly-attired imperial guards who escorted them to the Mongol ruler. It must have been with considerable relief that the Polos finally arrived at his summer palace in Shangdu (near present day Dolon-nor, Mongolia). A little worried that Kublai might be angry at them for having returned without his one hundred priests, the Polos were gratified at the glorious welcome provided them.

Niccolo presented his son, Marco, to Kublai and thus began a friendship that was to last -- although the Polos probably did not know it at the time -- for seventeen years. At this point, perhaps because Marco himself dictated the story of their travels, he takes center stage for the rest of the story and the elder Polos drop out of the picture. Although Marco's father and uncle were with him the entire time that he was in China, he mentions very little about them.

After a short stay in Shangdu, the Polos accompanied Kublai back to his winter palace , which was located on the site of what is today Beijing (Peking). Not long after they had settled in Beijing, Marco Polo was sent by Kublai on a mission. Living in his capital in the north, Kublai needed to be kept well-informed about what was going on in the various regions of his vast empire. He had many informants who told him all he needed to know about such things as rice harvests, or revenue collections, However, in Marco Polo he found an informant who, as a curious and observant outsider, could fill him in on other aspects of life in his newly conquered domain of China -- the customs, languages, and religions of his many subjects.

Marco's first mission took him to the province of present-day Yunnan. This journey carried him through the frontier provinces of what are today Shanxi (Shansi), Shaanxi (Shensi), Sichuan (Szechwan), as well as the country of Tibet. Here Marco observed the strange customs of the peoples and tribes living in these areas. In Sichuan Marco was amazed at the forests of giant bamboo, "and the terrifying drumfire of explosions which broke out when they caught fire." He also noted the elaborate religious cults of the Tibetans, calling them "diabolical arts," and the Yunnanese custom (which, he points out, Kublai had put a stop to) of murdering guests who were handsome and "cast a fine shadow." It was not their intention to rob them but to give the house the benefit of the strength of the stranger's spirit! Marco described in detail the practice of tatooing common in the Burma-Yunnan area at that time. He also noted the custom in one particular tribe of giving new-born babies to the father to look after for forty days because "they say that his wife has had her share of trouble carrying the infant in her womb"! In short, eager to impress his new master, Marco made a point of observing in very close detail everything he thought that Kublai might find curious. We have no way of knowing whether he was thinking also of remembering everything that he might tell his friends back in Europe, but the fact remains that his description of the southwestern border areas of China has never been matched by any other single traveller for scope and wealth of detail.

Kublai was duly impressed by Marco's report and promptly appointed him as his personal informant, a position Marco was to hold for the remainder of his stay in China. Although Marco was rumored to have held the post of Imperial Commisioner of Yangzhou, there is no mention in official Chinese records of this. During that time, Marco must have made countless journeys to various parts of China but he has left us with no chronological record of any of them. We do know that he made a second journey through the south of China, a journey which took him through the densely populated and wealthy cities of China proper, including Hangzhou (Hangchow), a city Marco fell in love with, and the bustling seaport of Quanzhou (pronounced Chu-an-joe) on the southern coast. Unlike the remote, and sometimes wild, regions of the frontier areas, southern China was extremely advanced -- economically, culturally, and technologically -- and here Marco Polo saw many aspects of Chinese civilization that his European readers would find unbelievable when he reported it to them.

Marco Polo also travelled to Indochina and, perhaps as part of this same expedition, to southern India. Marco's descriptions of the wealthy cities of South China and India would later inspire his countrymen -- the most famous of whom was Christopher Columbus -- to set out in search of the wealth of the Indies and of China, or Cathay as it was called then.

The Trip Back to Venice

After seventeen years in China, the Polos began to think about going home. For one thing, they were probably a little homesick. For another, Kublai Khan was aging quickly and the Polos began to worry what might happen to them if he should die. Kublai, however, was extremely reluctant to let them go, and were it not for another twist of fate they might never have returned to Venice!

In 1286, Arghun, Khan of Persia and Kublai's grand-nephew, lost his favorite wife. Her dying wish was that her place be filled by a woman of her own kin from a tribe in Mongolia. Therefore, an embassy was sent to Kublai Khan requesting that he find a substitute, which he did -- seventeen-year-old Lady Coachin. Because the overland route was rather treacherous, Arghun's envoys decided to return with the new guide by sea. But, not being used to sea travel, they begged Kublai to allow the more experienced Polos to accompany them back to Persia. The Khan finally consented and, after loading them with many gifts, sent them off.

At the beginning of 1292, the party set out from the southern port of Quanzhou. The trip home was not an easy one and the inclement weather forced them to stay on the island of Sumatra (now part of Indonesia) for five months. They also made several stops at Indian ports along the way before arriving, two years later, at the Persian port of Hormuz. Although they had started out with a retinue of more than six hundred, by the time they arrived at their destination there were only eighteen, including the Polos, two of the original three envoys, and Lady Coachin.

As it turns out, Arghun Khan had died in 1291 and so Lady Coachin was presented instead to his son, Prince Ghazan. After bidding what appears to have been a rather tearful farewell to the Mongol princess, the three Polos set sail for Venice. In August 1295, more than a quarter of a century after they had left, the Polos returned home.

Back in Venice

The story of the Polos' return to Venice has been told best by Marco Polo's biographer Giambatista Ramusio, who wrote in the fifteenth century. This is how he describes their homecoming:

> And when they got thither the same fate befel them as befel Ulysses, who, when he returned, after his twenty years' wanderings, to his native Ithaca, was recognized by nobody. Thus also these three gentlemen who had been so many years absent from their native city were recognized by none of their kinfolk, who were under the firm belief that they had all been dead for many a year past, as indeed had been reported. Through the long durations and hardships of their journeys, and through the many worries

> and anxieties that they had undergone, they were quite changed in aspect, and had got a certain indescribable smack of the Mongol both in air and accent, having indeed all but forgotten their Venetian tongue. Their clothes too were coarse and shabby, and of a Mongol cut...

Ramusio then goes on to relate how, in order to convince everyone of who they were, the Polos held a great banquet. There, in front of everyone, they ripped open the seams of their shabby garments and out poured a mass of rubies, emeralds and other precious stones. In the face of this overwhelming evidence, everyone was convinced and the Polos soon became quite famous. However, not everyone believed Marco's descriptions of the wealth and grandeur of Kublai's empire and soon people were calling him "Il Milione," because of his constant use of the word "millions" to describe this wealth.

Rusticello and the Writing of the Book

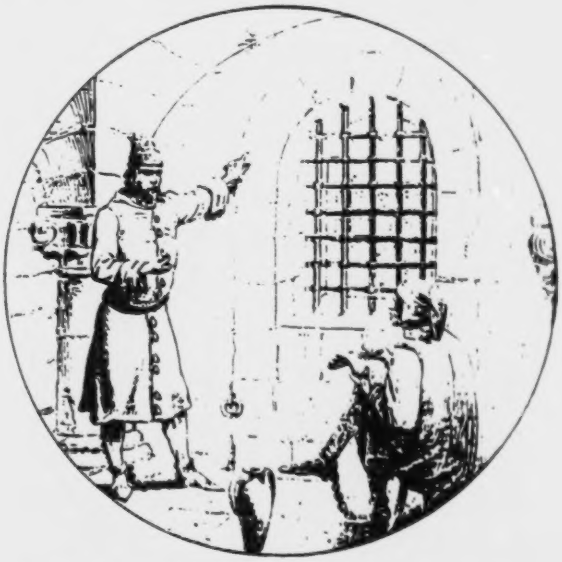
Marco Polo's home city of Venice was one of the three most important Italian city-states of the Middle Ages -- the other two being Genoa and Pisa. During the entire thirteenth century these three cities were involved in a bitter commercial rivalry that often erupted in actual military conflict. In the early part of the century Venice had the upper hand in trade along the shores of the Mediterranean. The Genoans were especially upset at this imbalance in commercial power and a dispute broke out in 1255 which lasted off and on, until 1294 and the Battle of the Ayas. In this battle the Genoans defeated the Venetians although they were much less powerful than their enemies. Encouraged by this, in 1298 they made elaborate preparations for yet another battle. Hearing of this, Venice got together a large fleet of ships and headed to the island of Curzola where Genoan ships awaited them.

Commanding one of these Venetian ships was none other than Marco Polo, Gentleman-Commander, who not long after his return to Venice had offered his services to the Venetian Navy. After a fierce battle on September 7, 1298, the Genoans won a complete victory and returned home with 7,000 prisoners -- Marco Polo among them. Marco was thrown into a dark and dank Genoan prison to await his fate. It was here that Marco was to meet a fellow-prisoner by the name of Rusticello -- the man who would help him to write his now famous book.

Rusticello, a citizen of the city-state of Pisa, had been captured when the Genoan navy had defeated the Pisan navy in 1284. Before his capture, Rusticello had been a writer of romances. That is to say, he would compile and rewrite the various stories belonging to the legendary cycle of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. He was by no means a literary genius but rather an industrious, simple man who sometimes wrote a bit too quickly and without much method or judgment. However, he did know the standard formulas for writing a romance and he also recognized a good story when he saw one. As Marco Polo began telling his fellow-prisoners of his adventures in China, Rusticello became captivated and soon convinced Marco that he should put it all down on paper. Marco dictated and Rusticello wrote and thus was born the Travels of Marco Polo, the original title of which was A Description of the World.

A year later, in July of 1299, a treaty was signed between Genoa and Pisa. Rusticello returned to Pisa and that is the last that we know of him. A treaty was also signed between Genoa and Venice and by August, 1299, Marco Polo went back to Venice with a newly written manuscript in his hands. Shortly after his release, Marco Polo married and eventually had three daughters. Little is known of his life until 1324 at which time he wrote his will bequeathing what was left of his Asian treasures -- surprisingly very little -- to his daughters. He probably died a short time after, leaving his legend and his book to the whole of the Western World.

This then, in brief, is the story of Marco Polo. However, in order to understand the significance of this thirteenth century traveller, it is important to place him in the wider historical context of East-West relations. In fact, the roots of this story go back as far as the fifth century B.C.! In the next section, we will take a quick -- but fascinating -- journey back in time and in so doing set the stage for Marco Polo's "discovery" of China, as well as our own discovery of Marco Polo.



Marco Polo & Rusticello in the Prison of Genoa.

PART ONE

Historical Background

CHAPTER ONE

EAST-WEST RELATIONS PRIOR TO MARCO POLO

Strangers at the Gate

On the 9th of April, 1241, 20,000 Polish and German soldiers led by Henry, Duke of Silesia, suffered a crushing defeat. Two days later, an estimated 65,000 Hungarians lay dead on a battlefield in their homeland. In both cases, the victors were Mongol armies. The Mongols, it seemed, were poised to conquer Europe. Who was this powerful and terrifying enemy who appeared seemingly from nowhere on the very doorstep of Europe? Two decades earlier, when the Mongols first made excursions into the West, a Russian chronicler expressed the ignorance that the rest of Europe was now confronted with as well: "...there came upon us unknown infidels, of whom no one knows who they are, whence they came or what may be their language, of what race they are or what is their faith." But centuries of isolation and ignorance which had separated East from West yielded no answers. In the absence of fact, Christian Europe reached for the only explanation that seemed to make sense: that, in punishment for its sins, God had unleashed a scourge of devils upon the world. Thus, in the beginning, the Mongols were identified with the forces of the Antichrist and, in particular, with the Biblical legend of Gog and Magog, the cannibalistic and unclean nations of Satan which, according to Biblical prophecy, would be loosed upon the world come Judgment Day. Closely associated with this was the then very popular legend of Alexander the Great who was said to have built a great gate in the Caucasus to hold back these demons.

As it happened, the Mongols did not invade Europe. This was not due to European resistance -- Medieval Europe was far too divided and disorganized to put up a fight -- but to a well-calculated decision, partly political and partly military, on the part of the Mongols themselves. But, Europe was thoroughly shaken by this sudden turn of events. The Mongol conquest of Hungary was, by all accounts, an amazing military feat. Obviously, this was no scruffy band of sheep-herders. Nor was it, as the Europeans began to realize once their initial panic had begun to subside, a horde of devils led by Satan. What followed then was a series of what might be called fact-finding missions into Mongol territory. These early travellers were often religious missionaries, for the proselytizing spirit ran as strong as political concerns in those days. From their accounts Europe learned a great deal about Mongol life and culture. Although not a missionary, Marco Polo was one of these early travellers, and he was to shed more light than anyone else on this world. In fact, one noted scholar goes so far as to say that Marco Polo, two hundred years before Columbus, discovered a "new" world for Europe. But, as we will find in this chapter, this world was neither new nor undiscovered; it was simply unknown to the Europeans of the time.

Why Asia Was Lost to Europe

Why was Asia such an unknown world to the people of Europe? Is it possible that before the thirteenth century there had been no contact at all between Europe and China? Were Marco Polo and his contemporaries the first Europeans to "discover" Asia? As it turns out, the history of European and Chinese relations goes back at least as far as the fifth century B.C. However, it is important to understand what these early relations were like in order to fully understand the importance of Marco Polo's contribution to Western knowledge of the East.

The very earliest European mention of a country corresponding to what is today China dates back to Herodotus, the Greek historian (5th century B.C.). Herodotus summarizes the account of a Greek traveller who supposedly ventured deep into the interior of Central Asia as far as the Altai or Tian Shan mountains. At these seemingly impassable mountains, the traveller turned back, although he did hear about a land beyond these mountains which reached all the way to the Eastern sea and which enjoyed a warm climate -- probably China. However, by the time of Alexander the Great, all mention of this far away land was lost, and apparently the Greek conqueror never even knew of the existence of Northern or Eastern Asia!

The Silk Road: The Chinese Connection

The real story of relations between Europe and China begins about the second century B.C. with the rise of the famous Silk Road, which for the first time linked China with Central Asia and from there on to Rome. The Silk Road (actually a series of roads rather than a single large one) was the result of the Chinese reaching out towards the West. During the reign of the first emperor of the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.), China embarked on a large number of military expeditions aimed at pushing back a powerful nomadic tribe (the Xiong-nu, pronounced shoong-noo) which had been threatening China's northern frontiers. As part of this military effort, the Han emperor sent an imperial envoy (named Zhang Qian, pronounced jang-chi-en) into Central Asia. The envoy's mission was to find a particular tribe who had once been fierce enemies of the Xiong-nu but had been gradually driven westwards and were now happily settled in the region near present day Bokhara in the Soviet Union. The envoy was unable to persuade this tribe to come to the aid of the Chinese, but he did return home with a wealth of information about the lands of Central Asia. For the first time, China heard about the rich kingdoms of Ferghana, Samarkand and Bokhara (all now in Soviet Central Asia), Balkh (now in Afghanistan), and Parthia (Persia or Iran). The envoy also heard about a far away empire called Li-jian, which many scholars believe to have been Rome, but he did not go there himself.

The primary result of journeys like these was the Silk Road. In establishing this travel route, the Chinese were mainly interested in maintaining a line of defense against nomads in the North. However, when they heard of the rich kingdoms of Central Asia, they began to encourage trade and diplomatic relations as well, and before long there was a steady stream of caravans from Central Asia going to China with gold, woolen and other textiles, ivory, coral, amber and glass. Leaving China were caravans laden with furs, ceramics, iron, lacquer, cinnamon, rhubarb, bronze objects and, of course, silk.

The Silk Road: The Roman and Central Asian Connections

At first this trade was mainly between China and the countries of Central Asia. Then, the Romans discovered silk. The story goes that it was in a major battle with the Parthians (Persians) that the Romans first noted with amazement the huge banners of shiny silk carried by the Parthian cavalry. By the first century B.C. the *Pax Romana* was in full swing and because of the general peace and prosperity, there was a growing demand for exotic luxury items. Not surprisingly, the Romans soon fell in love with silk and began to buy it in huge quantities. However, they were content to leave the actual trade in the hands of Central Asian merchants, and in particular the Parthians, who were more familiar with the trading routes. As a result, all the trade between China and Rome -- not only in silk, but spices as well -- was in the hands of Central Asian middlemen. These middlemen were very jealous of their monopoly over this lucrative trade and did everything to discourage any direct contact between China and Rome. In fact, Chinese accounts tell of a Chinese envoy who was sent to Rome but was actively discouraged by the Parthians from going any further:

> The general Ban Chao sent Gan Ying as an ambassador to Da Qin (Rome), and he arrived in Diao-zhi (Babylonia) on the coast of the Great Sea. When he was about to take passage across the Great Sea, the sailors of the western borders of An-xi (Parthia) told him that the sea was very vast, that it could be traversed within three months, but with unfavorable winds

> might take two years, that there was something in the sea which made a man long for home, and that many men lost their lives on it. When he heard this, Ying did not go any farther.

Confusion Over the Origins of Silk

Another result of this indirect trade was that even after centuries of using Chinese silks and spices, the West still did not know where they came from nor how they were produced. Some say that this was because the Chinese kept the origin of silk a secret so that it would seem more of an exotic and rare item. However, as we have seen, the Chinese were only secondarily interested in trade and had no pressing need to sell their silk. The blame, rather, must go to the Central Asian intermediaries who stood to gain most from Roman ignorance of the origins of the luxury items they so loved.

Thus, all the way down to the time of Marco Polo, Europeans were never too clear about the origins of silk. The first attempt to explain where it came from was Pliny (A.D. 23-79):

> The Seres[1] (are) so famous for the fleecy product of their trees. This pale floss, which they find growing on the leaves, they wet with water, and then comb out, furnishing thus a double task to our womenkind in first dressing the threads, and then again of weaving them into silk fabrics.[2] So has toil to be multiplied; so have the ends of the earth to be traversed; and all that a Roman damsel may exhibity her charms in transparent gauze.

Although by the sixth century A.D. silkworms had been smuggled into Europe and silk production begun on European soil, Pliny's description of the origin of silk continued to be passed down generation after generation. In fact, in 1260, the year Matteo and Niccolo Polo set out for Asia, the Italian writer Benedetto once again quoted Pliny about the silk that grows on trees. The mystery regarding the origins of silk also surrounded many of the other objects reaching Europe from China. It was not until Medieval travellers such as Marco Polo brought back first-hand reports about the lands from which they came that these mysteries were solved.

Mutual Images: Europe and China

These centuries of indirect contact between Europe and China provided each side with bits and scraps of information, sometimes true and oftentimes not, which they pieced together as best they could. What is interesting is that the "collage" of images they came up with were in many ways very similar. For one, both Europe and China were very uncertain as to each other's location. Second, they would both take facts descriptive of areas closer to them and apply them to the whole. For instance, the Romans often attributed customs of the tribes of Central Asia to the Chinese, and the Chinese often took things they had heard about the people of Persia or Syria and applied them to Rome. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both Europe and China attributed to each other many of the same qualities. Thus, the annals of the Chinese speak of the rich and densely populated cities of the "Kingdom of the Western Sea," as well as the peaceful and upright character of its citizens. The Chinese also make more fanciful attributions, such as the great abundance of marvelous items to be found in the West -- gold, gems, precious objects of all kinds, magicians, and even "pearls generated from the saliva of golden pheasants"!

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[1] Seres, a word originally derived from si, the Chinese word for silk, was the ancient Greek term for the Chinese, that is, the Silk-people. We derive the word sericulture from this word.

[2] The Romans imported raw silk from China which they then unravelled, dyed and rewove into a light, transparent, gauze-like material.

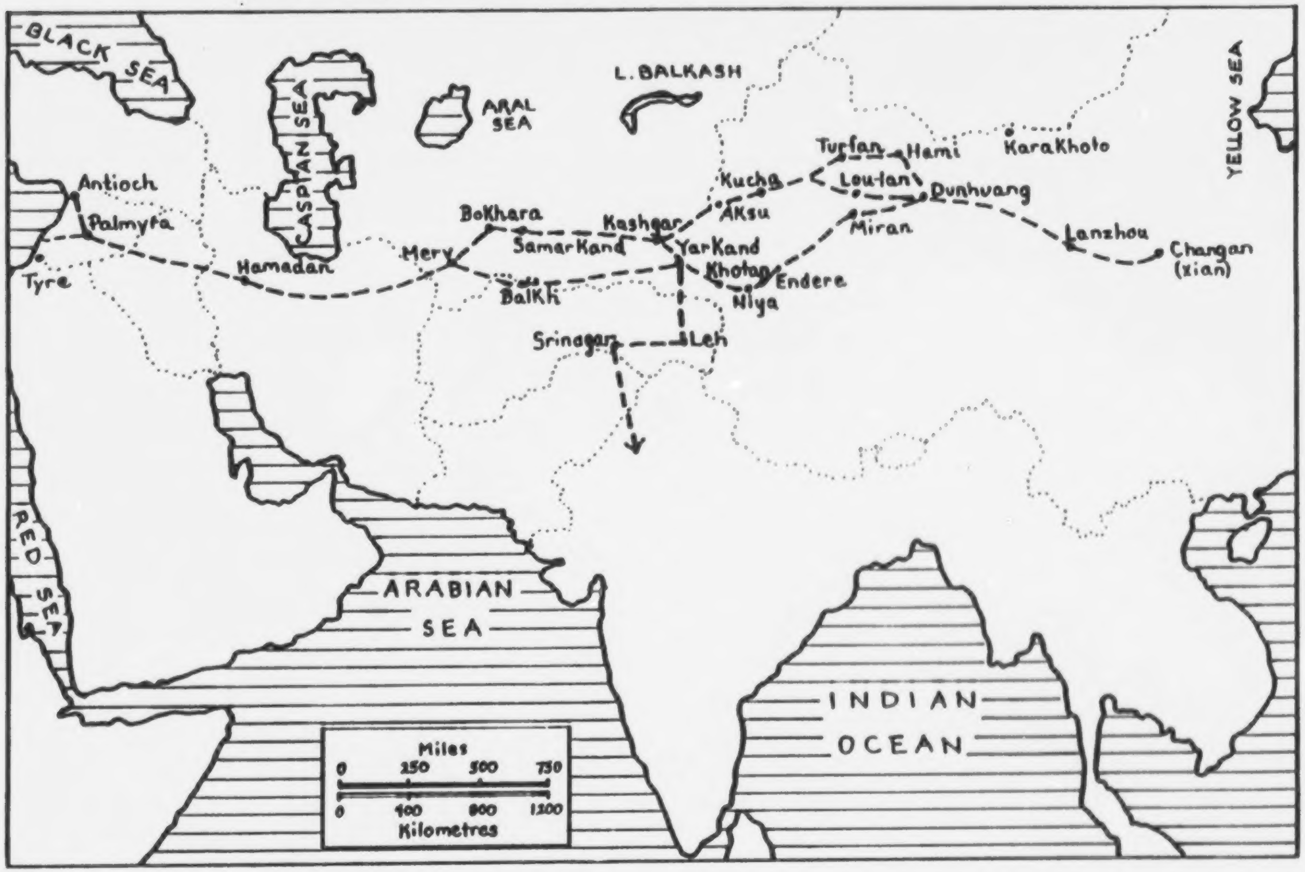
The European images of the Chinese (or "Seres") have been summarized by Henry Yule, the famous Marco Polo scholar, as follows:

> The region of the Seres is a vast and populous country, touching on the east the ocean and the limits of the habitable world. The people are civilized men, of mild, just and frugal temper, eschewing collisions with their neighbors and even shy of close intercourse, but not averse to dispose of their own products, of which raw silk is the staple, but which also include silk stuffs, furs and iron of remarkable quality.

We see then almost mirror images of two prosperous and "civilized" nations, rather vague, it is true, but not completely unfounded.

However, by the thirteenth century Europe had been completely cut off from China for almost six centuries. In the middle of the seventh century A.D., Arab armies had spread over Asia as far west as the Pyrenees in Spain and eastwards beyond the ancient trading cities of Bokhara and Samarkand, creating a huge Muslim empire, the largest empire the world had ever seen. As a result, the world the Europeans knew was more or less divided into two, the Muslim and the Christian. Although the trade between Central Asia and China continued to flourish, Western access to China would not be opened until the Mongols' rise to power in the thirteenth century. In these six centuries, the bits of truth gleaned by the ancient Romans and Chinese were almost completely lost in a haze of fanciful myth and legend, and by the time Marco Polo came along it was as if the two civilizations had never heard of each other.

The Main Routes of the Old Silk Road


BLACK SEA
CASPIAN SEA
ARAL SEA
L. BALKASH
YELLOW SEA
Antioch
Palmyra
Tyre
Hamadan
Merv
Bokhara
Samarkand
Balkh
Kashgar
Yarkand
Khotan
Niya
Endere
Aksu
Kucha
Turfan
Hami
Karakhoto
Lou-lan
Dunhuang
Miran
Lanzhou
Changan
(xian)
Srinagar
Leh
RED SEA
ARABIAN SEA
INDIAN OCEAN
Miles
0
250
500
750
0
400
800
1200
Kilometres

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CHAPTER TWO

NOMADS AND CONQUERORS: THE MONGOLS AND CHINGIS KHAN

Geography

The home of the Mongols was not, as many Europeans supposed, the fiery depths of Hades. Rather, it was the dry and bitterly cold steppe lands of what is today the Mongolian People's Republic and the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia within the People's Republic of China. This area is bounded on the Southeast by the vast plateaus of the Gobi Desert which rise from 3,000 to 4,500 feet above sea level. On the Chinese frontier the Gobi is unbroken desert and in the interior it is made up of barren steppes. In the West are the lofty Altai and Khanghai Mountains which rise over 13,000 feet. Although there are forests on the Siberian ranges of the Lake Baikal region in the Northwest, more than three-fourths of this area is made up of treeless pastureland. In this area, the summers are very short and the winters cold and dry. It was not a very hospitable environment, and the effort to adapt to it resulted in a highly specialized way of life called pastoral nomadism.

Nomadic Life

The nomadic life was one of self-sufficiency and constant movement. Cattle, sheep and goats provided the nomad with the necessities of life, food to eat and skins with which to fashion clothing and build his yurt, a tent made of felt stretched over light wood, which could be easily assembled and dismantled for travel. Given the importance of mobility, the horse was the nomad's most prized possession. When a man died, his steed was killed and laid alongside him so that he would have a horse to ride in the next world. And, of all crimes, horse thievery was considered by the nomads to be the most evil and punishable by instant death. The Mongol horse, actually only a pony, had an incredible endurance and is known to have travelled over 130 miles a day on extremely high and rocky terrain. These ponies made the Mongol archers nearly invincible.

Religion and Family

The religion of these nomads was basically a form of what is called "shamanism." They worshipped the forces of nature which, although so often hostile and cruel, were an intimate part of their lives. Ruling over everything was Tengri, which in Turkish means "Heaven" but which, in the eyes of the nomads, often took the form of a personal God.

Because of the hostility of the natural environment, the nomads had to stick together for survival. The basic unit of nomad society was the patrilineal (i.e., descent was traced through the male line) clan which in turn joined with other clans to form tribes and, finally, peoples or states. These groupings were held together by a complex network of bonds of loyalty which tied together not only family members but "blood brothers" as well. Nomad history was essentially the story of the tying and untying of these knots of loyalties in the constant struggle for survival and for power. Because pastoral nomadism requires a constant movement from pasture to pasture, power was derived not from ownership of land, as in agricultural societies, but from the ownership of the major, or best, cycles of migration. A family or tribe which came to own such a cycle was then in the position to "protect" the right of movement of lesser clans and tribes who, in exchange, provided military and other support. There was constant inter-tribal feuding instigated by this struggle for power, as well as by the need for wives -- marriage within the clan was strictly taboo. Thus, there developed a feudal-like organization by means of which, if the circumstances were right, a strong and powerful leader could rise to the top. Which is, of course, precisely what happened.

Chingis Khan: The Conqueror

In 1167 a child was born who, according to Mongol legend, "grasped in his right hand a clot of blood in the shape of a knuckle-bone playing piece," an omen of future greatness. This child, named Temujin but known best as Chingis (or Ghengis) Khan, was to forge the most extensive empire the world had ever known. The story of Chingis is a fascinating one and has been told many times.

Our interest here is only to sketch a brief portrait of the first ruler of the Mongol Empire so that he can be compared with his grandson and successor, Kublai Khan, the ruler of Marco Polo's China.

Chingis, a name which means something like "Universal Ruler" (it was bestowed upon him in 1206 when he became Great Khan), rose to power by dint of ruthless cunning, great bravery, much patience, pure genius and what seems to have been an overwhelming charismatic appeal. He showed uncanny ability not so much for innovation, as for building on the very foundations of nomadic society and politics. Thus, his power was built up by means of a slow and difficult accumulation of tribal and personal loyalties. His basic military and political organization was conceived of in terms of the family. His armies were divided into units of ten, one hundred, one thousand, headed by hand-picked leaders who were often the kinsmen of the men under their command. Into these groupings he injected an element of discipline and formal training which previously had been non-existent. All of this resulted in a superbly well-knit and disciplined army which, although not particularly large in numbers, spread across Asia and Europe wielding bloodshed and devastation. As a soldier and military strategist, Chingis was unmatched. His military tactics combined a ruthless cruelty, dogged persistence, and a wide array of tricks and ruses designed to strike terror into any would-be resistors. In fact, modern military planners including, it is said, Hitler himself, have studied his strategies closely. While the number of lives destroyed by Chingis' troops were of truly genocidal proportions, this must be seen in the context of an extremely bloody and violent age, where even in Europe it was not uncommon for tens of thousands to perish in a single battle. Chingis was, first and foremost, a conqueror, or as he himself is reputed to have said:

> Man's highest joy is in victory; to conquer one's enemies, to pursue them to deprive them of their possessions, to make their beloved weep, to ride on their horses, and to embrace their wives and daughters.

Chingis Khan: The Ruler

Nevertheless, Chingis was not only a conqueror. As his most trusted advisor is said to have reminded him, "The Empire was won on horseback but it won't be governed on horseback." This was especially true since for the first time, a nomadic people had conquered two extremely advanced and civilized states, Persia and China. Needless to say, the life of a nomad did not afford much experience in the administration of an empire. As an administrator, however, Chingis showed an extraordinary amount of wisdowm and flexibility. He was quick to seek out the expert advice of people from these advanced societies: Arabs, Persians, Turks and Chinese. For example, Chingis' personal advisor, Yeh lu Qu-Cai, who was of mixed Chinese and nomadic descent, played a crucial role in the establishment of the Mongol Empire in China. It is believed that he saved North China from complete and total destruction by convincing the Khan that it would be more lucrative to encourage agriculture and trade for the taxes and tributes they would raise, than to level everything in order to make pasture land. Indeed, as soon as Chingis became aware of the potential of agricultural production, he did everything possible to encourage it, establishing an extremely efficient postal system, laying down very harsh penalties for robbery and banditry, and providing merchants with armed escorts. The growing prosperity reflected in Marco Polo's accounts of China was due largely to the Pax Mongolica for which Chingis set the foundations.

Chingis also utilized foreign expertise in other ways. The Mongolian language was given written form using the alphabet of the Uighurs, a literate, Turkish nomadic group which provided Chingis with many of his administrative personnel. But, by far the greatest use of foreigners (that is, non-Mongol peoples) was in the area of city-building. The nomads knew next to nothing of stonemasonry, brick-laying or architectural engineering. Thus, they made use of artisans from all over Eurasia. In China, whole populations of artisans were moved from place to place in order to build the cities of the Khan. In fact, the Mongols so prized these artisans that although it was their practice, especially under Chingis, to slaughter the entire population of a conquered city, often the artisans would be spared their lives. As we shall see, this utilization of foreign expertise was something Chingis' successor Kublai would continue. In fact, Marco Polo would serve seventeen years in the capacity of Kublai's very own "foreign expert."

Chingis glued together his empire in other ways as well. One of the most important was his drawing upon divine sanction for his rule. Chingis, not unlike most successful world leaders, was firmly convinced that Tengri, the God of the Mongols, had been behind all of his victories, and credit was duly given to him. In fact, all official proclamations were issued jointly in the name of Tengri and the Khan. This idea may well have been derived from the age-old Chinese concept of the Mandate of Heaven, which holds that political and military success was a sign of heavenly approval.

Nevertheless, always an astute political realist, Chingis instituted a firm policy of religious tolerance, thus setting a precedent for all subsequent Mongol rulers, including Kublai. European travellers coming from a world fragmented by religious disputes and factionalism were especially impressed by this apparent religious freedom. In truth, it was a political strategy of great foresight. The adherents of the many faiths flourishing in the Mongol Empire during that time -- Buddhists, Muslims, Nestorian Christians, Manichaeists, etc., -- lived on the hope that one day the Khan, and therefore all of his subjects, would convert to their own particular faith. They continued to court the Khan's favor and preach loyalty to him, thus perpetuating his power. The first Christian missionaries from the West evidently had this same dream, but is was soon dispelled. For although the Mongol rulers may have been truly tolerant, their ultimate aims were political, as can be seen in the occasional crackdown on religions -- especially Islam and Daoism -- that sometimes "went too far."

Another significant step Chingis took to bind his Empire together was the establishment of an Imperial code of laws, the Great Yasa. We have only a partial knowledge of the contents of this code but what we do have shows an interesting combination of nomadic superstition, moral edicts and truly enlightened laws. Thus, it was forbidden to wash or urinate in rivers because they were the home of the river gods; men were encouraged not to get drunk more than three times a month (the Mongols were great drinkers); and religious tolerance was made law. These laws included many against theft, adultery and banditry, and were severely enforced, greatly reducing the violence once so characteristic of nomadic life. Interestingly enough, the Great Yasa also limited the powers of the Khan himself: he was to be known by no grand titles other than that of Khan, he could not enlist men under the age of twenty into his army and, most important of all, his successor was to be named by a kuriltai, or gathering of all the princes of the Imperial clan.

It would seem, then, that Chingis had covered all the bases in the consolidation of his vast empire. Nevertheless, there were several fatal architectural flaws which even the master-builder could not fix.

The Mongol Empire: Wealth Versus Mobility

There are many reasons why Chingis' empire eventually fell apart, but perhaps the heart of the problem lay in what Owen Lattimore, a noted scholar in the field of nomadic history, sees in terms of wealth versus mobility. It is a problem seen most clearly in the history of the relations between China and the nomadic tribes at her northern borders where it becomes almost a historical motif. It is a complex issue, but the crux of it is that the power of the nomads lay in their military superiority which in turn depended on constant mobility. As soon as they gave this up for the settled world of agriculture, urban settlement, and the bureaucratic intricacies of administration, this power was slowly, but surely, undermined. The reason for this is that the nomadic Mongol way of life did not give the Mongols experience in administering an empire. That is to say, they did not know how to do such things as collecting taxes, managing large-scale finances, regulating trade and commerce, administering large urban settlements, etc. As a result, they had to use non-Mongol experts, Persians, Turks, etc., to help them administer their empire. Chingis, however, realized the danger inherent in this set-up and made sure to keep a balance between nomadic military superiority and the bureaucratic skills of his conquered subjects. Thus, he made extremely careful and calculated use of foreign expertise and, in fact, he hoped that one day he could do away with the "foreign experts" and use only Mongols.

There is no question that Chingis was a nomad to the end, regarding the conquered lands as property of the clan, to be used for their benefit and pleasure. After his death, he divided the empire, according to Mongol custom, among the four eldest sons of his principal wife. This began the process which Chingis so feared. Each section, or khanate, of the Empire became increasingly self-sufficient and increasingly influenced and molded by the customs, languages and religions of the people over whom they ruled. Less than a generation after the death of Chingis, the Empire began to be torn between these two conflicting extremes, mobility and wealth, and an unbridgeable gap opened between those Mongols who fell under the sway of the sophisticated civilizations of China and Persia, and those who reacted in the opposite way, rejecting all of the trappings of civilization. Chingis apparently was not unaware of the danger and is noted to have said prophetically:

> After us the descendents of our clan will wear gold, embroidered garments, eat rich and sweet food, ride fine horses and embrace beautiful women, but they will not say that they owe all this to their fathers and elder brothers, and they will forget us and these great times.

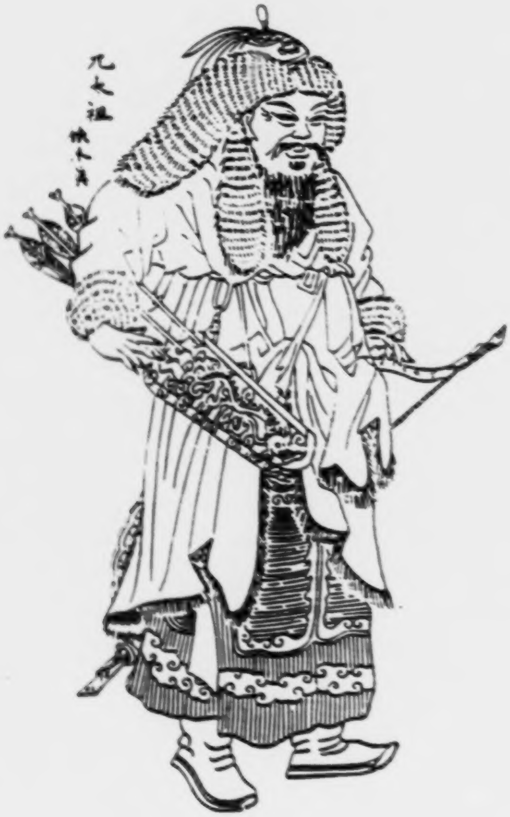
Karakorum

Symbolic, perhaps, of this gradual transition, was the city of Karakorum. Located at the foot of the Hangai Mountains on the upper course of the Orkhon River of Mongolia, an area that was traditionally a center of nomadic power, Karakorum had been chosen by Chingis for his military headquarters and later, in 1235, his son Ogedei built a city there. It was to this city that many of the early European missionaries/envoys went to seek out the Khan, and their accounts provide us with an ample description of what it was like. The city was built around a grand complex of imperial palaces, built by foreign, largely Chinese, artisans along the style of the traditional Chinese city of Beijing, which had been destroyed by the Mongols in 1215. These palaces were furnished quite lavishly, the main attraction being a magnificent silver tree from whose branches hung leaves and fruit of gilded silver and through which flowed four different kinds of intoxicant liquors into the silver bowls that sat at the foot of the tree waiting to receive them. This incredible piece of engineering had been commissioned by the Khan (Chingis's son) and built by a Parisian goldsmith by the name of Guillame Boucher who had been captured during the Mongol invasions of Eastern

Europe. Nevertheless, in this early capital the Chinese (and other foreign) artisans and the Muslim merchants, each living in their respective sections of the city, were the sole sedentary population. The Mongols still lived in their felt-covered yurts, which they set up around the edges of the city.

From Karakorum to Beijing

In 1256, the capital was transferred to southeastern Mongolia. Shortly afterwards Kublai moved inside the Great Wall of China and established the magnificent capital of Cambaluc on the site of what is today Beijing. The yurts were put away and the Mongols moved into the city. It was a symbolic step which, although Kublai would not have believed it at the time, was the beginning of the end for the Mongol Empire. Nevertheless, in China, which is now the central focus of our story, the decline was preceded by a period of relative peace and material prosperity. In fact, for the Mongols at least, it was a period of grandeur and glory and as such, made a deep impression on the mind of the Venetian traveller, Marco Polo and, through him, on the mind of Medieval Europe.



Chinese drawing of Chingis Khan.

CHAPTER THREE

CONQUERORS AND CONQUERED: KUBLAI KHAN AND MONGOL RULE IN CHINA

The Conquest of Northern and Southern China

Prior to the coming of the Mongols, China had been divided into two separate dynasties. The North was occupied by the Jurched, a non-Chinese group of nomadic origin, who were the last of a sequence of "barbarians" who had been ruling North China ever since the tenth century. The dry and dusty plains of the North had been the original home of Chinese civilization. However, the nomadic tribesmen of the northern steppes, using the military techniques that Chingis Khan would later improve upon, grew in power and began to encroach on Chinese territory. As a result, the economic and cultural center of China began to move south.

Geographically better endowed, the South stood in stark contrast to the more forbidding and less fertile areas of the North. In fact, Marco Polo himself saw them as two different worlds: in the North was CATHAY (derived from Khi-tai, the name of a non-Chinese nomadic group that ruled North China for a time; the Russian name for all of China is still Kitai) and in the South was MANZI, a word derived from the Chinese meaning wild, barbarian, uncultivated. In fact, in the early history of China, the South was a largely undeveloped area inhabited mostly by non-Chinese indigenous peoples, a "wild" land, to which poets and officials who spoke too critically of their king were sent in exile. However, by the time of the Mongol invasion, South China (divided from the North at this time by the Huai River), was the land of the Southern Sung Dynasty (1126-1279) the capital of which was located in Hangzhou. During the thirteenth century, it was the richest and the most advanced -- culturally, economically and technologically -- country in the world.*

The fact that the Southern Sung period was one of such great prosperity and sophistication made the coming of the Mongols all the more traumatic, and explains the deep hostility that many Chinese, especially the Chinese educated class, bore towards their Mongol overlords. In fact, while the Mongol conquest of North China had been relatively swift (completed by 1241), the conquest of the Southern Sung went much more slowly and, although begun by Chingis himself, was not completed util 1279 by his grandson, Kublai Khan. Part of the reason for this was the more difficult terrain of the South, filled with mountains, lakes, waterways, and rice paddies, which was an obstacle to the Mongol horsemen used to the flat, open plains. A second obstacle was posed by the walled cities of the Southern Sung, for which the Mongols had to learn the art of siegecraft -- often from captured Chinese soldiers pressed into service. Finally, the Chinese themselves put up a stiff resistance (although there were many collaborators as well) and the Chinese annals are full of accounts of almost superhuman bravery on the part of many Chinese generals. However, the Mongol military might was overwhelming. Certain of victory, in 1271 Kublai chose a Chinese name for his new dynasty, the Yüan (pronounced you-an), meaning original or beginning, and renewed his attack against the Southern Sung. Hangzhou, the capital, was captured in 1276, and in 1279 the remnants of the Sung navy, with the last Chinese emperor -- only a child -- on board one of these ships, was sunk off the coast of southern China. 1280 is the official beginning of the Yüan dynasty which lasted for 89 years and marks the first time the whole of China, North and South, was unified under a single barbarian ruler.

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*See Jacques Gernet, Daily Life in China: On the Eve of the Mongol Invasion (1250-1276), for a vivid description of thirteenth century city life in South China.

Mongols and Chinese: Worlds Apart

There could perhaps be no ways of life more diametrically opposed to each other than those of the Mongols and the Chinese (and particularly the Chinese educated class). Just to give a few examples: the Chinese had developed an intricate and complex writing system, and by the thirteenth century already had a long and rich literary tradition. The Mongols had only recently, under Chingis, adopted the alphabet of the Uighur Turks to make a Mongolian script, and had very little in the way of written literature. The Chinese had a long philosophical tradition and during the Southern Sung had developed a very sophisticated form of Confucianism. The Mongols, on the other hand, followed a very basic form of shamanism.

Even in the most minute details of daily life, the differences were very great. The Chinese wore silks and cottons; the Mongols wore leathers and furs. The Chinese ate mostly rice and vegetables and drank tea; the Mongols ate meat and the cheese and fermented drinks made from mare's milk. The Chinese had almost made a fetish of cleanliness, bathing frequently; for the Mongols living in the cold, dry steppes of the north, bathing was a luxury. The list could go on and on. Although these were differences arising originally from geographic differences, the Chinese often regarded all nomadic tribesmen as uncouth, brutish, and unclean. In short, they were "barbarians" of the worst sort. The extremely violent conquest of South China -- a country that was truly "civilized" in every sense of the word -- served only to deepen these feelings of ill will and suspicion. The result of all this was a deep and inevitable schism between the conquerors and the conquered.

Kublai Khan as Administrator

Kublai was, of course, not unaware of the hostility the Chinese bore him and he organized the military and administrative organizations of his empire accordingly. To begin with, Kublai was careful to exclude Chinese intellectuals from the important offices of his administration (although they did retain offices, under Mongol supervision, at lower levels). Instead, he surrounded himself with "foreign experts" from all over the Mongol Empire -- Uighur Turks, Muslims from Central Asia, Persians, Nestorian Christians, and even an occasional European, including Marco Polo himself!

Kublai also imposed a strict class system on China, with the Mongol ruling class at the top, followed by the non-Chinese foreigners, then the Chinese of North China who, having lived under barbarian rule for several centuries, were presumably more used to their ways. At the bottom were the Southern Chinese, by far the majority of the population. Discrimination against the Chinese was carried out in many ways -- political, legal, and socio-economic. For instance, the Chinese were punished far more severely than the Mongols for the same crime; they were not allowed to bear arms or learn military skills (apart from soldiers); and they could not walk in the streets of the city at night.

It is clear that Kublai was taking no chances with the Chinese, and this is nowhere more evident than in his military set-up, which proved, more than anything else, that despite the grandeur of the physical trappings of Kublai's court, the Mongol position in China was largely military in nature.

Kublai in Historical Perspective

From the Chinese point of view, Kublai Khan was a "barbarian" and remained so. For all his imperial trappings, Kublai's major interest was still military conquest, and his major form of recreation was hunting. In the traditional Chinese view, it was the duty of the Emperor to patronize the arts and literature, and to cultivate Confucian virtues. As a foreign interloper, Kublai showed only a superficial interest in such things.

On balance, it can be said that Kublai and the Mongols contributed very little to Chinese life. Some scholars even feel that the Mongol period caused a cultural and economic depression from which traditional Chinese civilization never fully recovered. However, historians generally acknowledge two major achievements of Kublai: the extension of the Grand Canal and the Mongol Postal Route System.

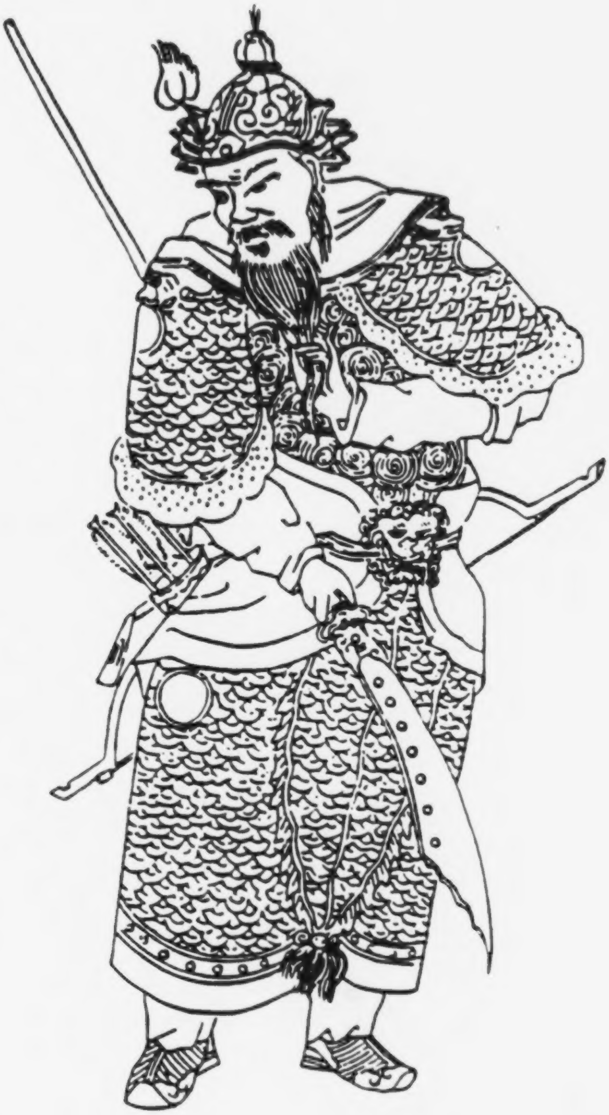
The Grand Canal was not completely new. It was an extension and widening of canals built by earlier dynasties to connect the capital at Beijing with the South, where most of the rice was produced. Completed in 1289 with the forced labor of over two and a half million Chinese laborers, the Grand Canal became the principal artery of communication between North and South China for the next 600 years. It still flows with traffic today. (Ironically, when Marco Polo saw it, he thought it was a "large river" instead of a man-made canal.)

The Mongol Postal Route System was the network of roads and stations through which Kublai Khan tied together his vast empire. Kublai had roads built all over China. At regular intervals along these routes were post stations which provided shelter, supplies, extra horses, and, if needed, protection for Imperial envoys, traders, merchants, and other travellers. Tied to this system was a system of runners who, by means of a highly organized relay system, could make transmission of messages from the capital to the provinces an extremely speedy affair. Marco Polo devotes several pages to a description of the system:

> You must know that the city of Beijing is a center from which many roads radiate to many provinces, one to each, and every road bears the name of the province to which it runs. The whole system is admirably contrived. When one of the Great Khan's messengers sets out along any of these roads, he has only to go twenty-five miles and there he finds a posting-station which in their language is called yamb and in our language may be rendered 'horse-post'. At every post the messengers find a spacious and palatial hostelry for their lodging. These hostelries have splendid beds with rich coverlets of silk and all that befits an emissary of high rank. Here the messengers find no less than 400 horses, stationed here by the Great Khan's orders and always kept in readiness for his messengers when they are sent on any mission. And you must understand that posts such as these, at distances of twenty-five or thirty miles, are to be found along all the

> main highways leading to the provinces of which I have spoken ...And this held good throughout all the provinces and kingdoms of the Great Khan's empire.

Descriptions such as this are part of the important legacy that Marco Polo has left us. However, his was not the earliest European description of Asia under the Mongols. We are fortunate to have access to two other accounts which predate Marco's and form the basis of the following chapter.



Chinese drawing of Mongol warrior.

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CHAPTER FOUR

EUROPEAN TRAVELLERS TO ASIA BEFORE MARCO POLO

The Polos, although by far the most famous, were not the first Europeans to visit Asia in the thirteenth century. Thanks to the conquests of Chingis Khan and the network of postal routes with which he linked his new empire, it had become possible to travel in relative safety from Europe to the Yellow Sea. Thus, by the middle of the thirteenth century, Europeans began, for the first time since the Roman era, to venture east of Baghdad. Two of these early travellers left detailed and informative accounts of their travels in Asia. While neither of these European travellers reached China itself, their accounts provide a detailed picture of the Mongol Empire at an earlier point in time. They also offer a very different perspective on the Mongols than that of Marco Polo, who saw the Mongol Empire at its height. But first, we might well ask, why in the Middle Ages, an era singularly lacking in curiosity about the world beyond the Christian borders, would Europeans venture into such unknown lands?

In Search of Allies and Converts

In fact, the Europeans had good reasons to look Eastward, both in military and religious terms. And in an era marked by large-scale religious wars, it is hard to differentiate between the two. The threatened Mongol invasion of Europe in 1241 had sent a shiver of terror through Western Europe and forced its leaders to take stock of their ignorance in regards to Asia. Fortunately, the Mongols turned back for their own reasons, and Europe was spared. Observing the devastation that the Mongols were now wreaking on the Muslim world, Western Europe, no longer as concerned for its own safety, began to think in terms of enlisting the same Mongol soldiers who had recently slaughtered thousands of Europeans as allies against the Muslims. (The Muslims and Christians had become bitter enemies after a century of bloody and unhappy "holy" wars known as the Crusades in Europe.) This idea of an alliance against the "heathen" Muslims, together with the hope of converting the Mongol hordes, whose religion was unknown, inspired a new interest in Inner Asia among European rulers. Their dream, at least for a time, was for a world empire governed by the Pope in Rome, dominated by Latin culture, and protected by Mongol military might! As far-fetched as this dream might seem to have been, it must be understood in the context of legends and rumors which formed the basis of European knowledge of Asia at the time of the Mongol invasions.

In Search of Lost Christians

Chingis Khan, as indicated earlier, had established in his Empire a policy of religious tolerance, something unheard of in Medieval Europe. Rumors of this had reached Europe, along with stories of Christians who were living and practicing their faith deep in Asia. In fact, there were groups of "Nestorian Christians" sprinkled throughout Asia at the time of the Mongol Empire. Originating in the Middle East, this early Christian sect had split off from the dominant Christian Church because of beliefs that were at odds with the teachings from Rome. Although persecuted, the sect had flourished, and had reached China via the Silk Route in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.). It was this sect that the Europeans had heard about, little suspecting that it was a Christianity at considerable odds with that of the Roman church.

But a greater interest in Asia was aroused not by fact but by fiction. Supposedly, a great Christian kingdom existed in Asia, that of Prester John. (Originally, legend placed this kingdom in Africa; later the myth was transferred to Asia.) This legend was bolstered by a letter of unknown origin (supposedly from Prester John) which circulated to European rulers in the twelfth century, describing a marvelous kingdom of wealth and power. To a Europe torn and divided on the one hand, and threatened by "infidels" (i.e., the Muslims) on its borders on the other, this picture of an utopian paradise ruled over by a Christian monarch was understandably attractive. Despite the lack of proof of his existence, the popes and kings of Europe cherished the possibility of finding Prester John. Thus, when in 1221 there was a rumor of a great Christian monarch who was fighting the Muslims and toppling their "unholy" empire, it was thought to be Prester John. As Europe soon found out for herself, this monarch was neither Christian nor Prester John; it was Chingis Khan. Nevertheless, the European rulers did not give up hope. In the mid-thirteenth century they began to send missionary envoys into the Mongol empire in search of Prester John and with the hope of converting the apparently open-minded Mongol rulers. These first envoys from Europe did not find Prester John, but they did discover a totally new way of life, a new world, and their accounts represent the very first direct and authentic descriptions in Western literature of Asia under the Mongols. As precursors to Marco Polo, a brief mention of their travels, fascinating in themselves, deserves to be made.

The First Envoy: Friar John

The first of these envoys was a Franciscan friar, John de Plano Carpino. The account of his travels, called the Historia Mongalorum, represents the first systematic and detailed description of the peoples and cultures of Inner Asia written by a Westerner. A man of tremendous endurance, he set out from Lyons, France on Easter Day, 1245. After more than a year of untold hardships, he arrived at Karakorum, then the capital of the Mongolian empire. The significance of his account lies in the fact that it presents us the Mongolian Empire while it was still in the process of formation, still tied to its Mongol, nomadic roots and relatively untouched as yet by the civilizing effects of Persia and China. (Marco Polo's book, on the other hand, presents the Empire at its height and in its fullest glory.)

Friar John's great strength rested in his description of the human geography of Asia. He gives us a description of the nations, religions and customs of the Mongols, and an extremely minute analysis of the Mongol military and political organization (described in Chapter Two) which had made possible the conquest and administration of the largest empire in the history of the world. The sheer wealth of information is all the more impressive when one recalls that these early travellers, including Marco Polo, had no cameras or tape-recorders to help them in their task, but stored these prodigious amounts of information in their heads.

Although Friar John did not himself go to China, he did meet Chinese people in Karakorum and his description of them is that of a civilized people who, although not exactly Christians, were not lacking in religious sentiment either. His reference to the Old and New Testament may well refer to the Buddhist sacred texts or some similar philosophical/religious books.

> Now these Cathayans (Chinese) of whom we have been speaking are heathen men, and have a written character of their own. Moreover, it is said they have an Old and New Testament, and Lives of the Fathers, and religious recluses, and buildings which are used for churches as it were, in which they pray at their own times; and they say they have also some saints of their own...They seem indeed to be kindly and polished folks enough. They have no beard, and in character of countenance have a considerable resemblance to the Mongols, but are not so broad in the face. They have a language of their own. Their betters as craftsmen in every art practiced by man are not to be found in the whole world. Their country is very rich in wine, gold, silver, silk and in every kind of produce that tends to the support of mankind.

This description of the Chinese contrasts sharply with his description of the Mongols whose country, he notes, in a brief, subjective moment, is "more wretched than it is possible to describe."

It is important to remember that Friar John's mission was first and foremost a religious one -- to seek conversion of the Khan. The Khan (not Kublai) responded with an extremely haughty and arrogant reply to the Pope. This perhaps explains the deep hostility and disappointment that lies beneath much of Friar John's report, despite its admirable objectivity. There is no question that Friar John saw himself as the representative of an enlightened and superior civilization, and the Mongols' seeming lack of interest in what he had to offer was crushing. He returned to Europe, made his report, the value of which was not realized at the time, and died in 1252, feeling, perhaps, that he had failed in his mission.

Friar William

The year after Friar John's death, a second Franciscan, Friar William Rubruck, was sent by King Louis IX to the Mongol court at Karakorum. Like Friar John, Friar William failed in his primary mission, although there was a new Khan (Guyuk Khan) now at Karakorum who proved far more amenable to what this visitor from the West had to say. Friar William was even allowed to engage in public debates with representatives of various Asiatic religions. But the Khan had the final word on the subject:

> As God gives us the different fingers of the hand, so he gives to man diverse ways...God gave you (i.e., the Christians) the Scriptures, and you do not keep them; He gave us (i.e., the Mongols) diviners, we do what they tell us, and we live in peace.

Even though Friar William failed to convert the Mongols, he brought back a detailed account of Asian societies and cultures, one that shows a far greater curiosity and human warmth than did Friar John's. Thus, Friar William's descriptions extend to the most minute details of religious customs and rites, household furnishings, food and drink, and a myriad of other matters of interest. His vivid description of the court-camp of Karakorum is especially good and provides us with a picture of what it was like.

Like his predecessor, Friar William did not go to China himself, but in Karakorum he talked with a Tibetan priest returning home from China, and from him he learned of such things as paper money, which had been developed in China in the ninth century and was widely used by the Mongols. He also mentions the Chinese writing system, something which, strangely enough, Marco

Polo completely fails to mention. Friar William tells us that:

> The Cathayans (Chinese) write with a brush such as painters paint with and make in one figure the several letters containing a single word.

Although he evidently misunderstood the "several letters" (Chinese is not an alphabetical language), he had understood that the ideograms used by the Chinese were somehow different from other forms of writing.

Friar William is not completely positive in his reports and, in fact, expresses a deep repugnance against the Mongol methods of conquest which, it is true, often involved treachery and deceit. This is understandable in the light of the fact that Friar William had travelled through a Russia only recently invaded by the Mongols and strewn with the bodies of the dead. Likewise, he had vivid memories of his Polish and Hungarian compatriots, who had been slaughtered by the soldiers of the very Khan to whom he later, barefoot and on his knees, had to pay homage.

Above all, the hopes these missionaries had of converting the Mongol Khans were rapidly shattered. In view of the fact that their most cherished dreams came to nothing, some bitterness is to be expected, and the objectivity of their reports seems all the more remarkable because of it.

The European Response

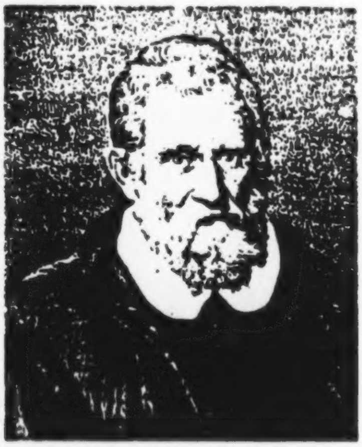
What these early travellers saw in the course of their journeys through Asia was so different from what they had ever imagined that they shared a deep fear that their countrymen in Europe would not believe them. Thus, Friar John ends his account with repeated assurances that in it he has told "the whole truth and nothing but the truth," and he even gives the names of people who can bear witness to the fact that he actually did make these journeys. Marco Polo's book was received with much the same scepticism.

PART TWO

China Through Marco Polo's Eyes

Every traveller, medieval or modern, carries along with his suitcases and trunks, a certain amount of "cultural baggage." Marco Polo was no exception. Despite his 17 years in China, Marco Polo remained very much European in outlook, and he saw China with the eyes of a thirteenth-century Venetian. But what distinguishes Polo from his predecessors is that he also saw China through the eyes of an official of the Mongol Court. As we have noted elsewhere, Marco was taken into Kublai Khan's service as soon as he arrived in China. He soon came to regard himself as a loyal subject of the Khan. As an important member of the Mongol ruling class, he acquired substantial rights and privileges. He also came to share the Mongol suspicion of their Chinese subjects, and often overlooked the conflicts and tensions between the two. It is significant, for example, that Marco Polo never learned Chinese. Marco only learned the official languages of the Mongol court -- Mongolian, Turkish, and Persian. (He used interpreters to speak to the native Chinese.)

In order to fully understand Marco Polo's description of China, we must recognize that he used a double frame of reference. One was his own Medieval European view of the world, and the other was a Mongol view of China. It is perhaps asking too much of this thirteenth century traveller to provide us with a Chinese view of China as well. However, while his privileged position with the Mongol court may have distorted Marco's view of the Chinese, it also gave him a rare inside view of the life of the court of the Great Khan of Khans, Kublai.



Italian engraving of Marco Polo.

CHAPTER FIVE

KUBLAI KHAN

Kublai, Great Khan of Khans: The Man

> I have come to the point in our book at which I will tell you of the great achievements of the Great Khan now reigning. The title Khan means in our language, Great Lord of Lords. And certainly he has every right to this title; for everyone should know that this Great Khan is the mightiest man, whether in respect of subjects or of territory or of treasure, who is in the world today or who ever has been, from Adam our first parent down to the present moment. And I will make it quite clear to you in our book that this is the plain truth, so that everyone will be convinced that he indeed the greatest lord the world has ever known. Here then is my proof.

Thus begins Marco Polo's description of Kublai Khan. From the very first time he saw him surrounded by all his regal pomp and glory, Marco was very taken with this Mongol ruler. In many ways his book can be seen as a celebration of Kublai's power. It is clear that Marco idolized the Khan, perhaps seeing in him a version of Prester John, the ideal king for which Europe so longed. Whatever the case, Marco's admiration did not diminish throughout the seventeen years he spent in the Khan's service and his accounts provide more details concerning the man himself--his appearance, his family life, his habits--than any other source, Western or Asian.

Marco describes his sovereign as follows:

> The personal appearance of the Great King of Kings, whose name is Kublai is as follows: He has a fine figure, neither tall nor short, but of middle height. He has the proper amount of flesh and is exceedingly well-shaped in all his limbs. His countenance is white and red, like a rose, and his eyes black and beautiful, his nose shapely and well-placed.

This is a very complimentary description but if one looks at the Chinese portraits of Kublai, it is clear that Marco has forgotten to mention the elegant--and typically Mongol--moustache as well as the tuft of beard at the point of his chin. If one thinks about it, Marco's description would apply more to a young girl or boy rather than to a man who was middle-aged when Marco first met him and was rapidly aging by the time the Polos left China. In fact, Marco had used a typical Medieval description of the ideal European king--youthful, ruddy and clean-shaven--which can be found in pictures, on coins, and written in the legends and romances of Medieval Europe. Whether this was Rusticello's fault or not, it is clear that Marco wanted to make sure that his readers "got the picture," in terms they could relate to, of an ideal ruler.

Court Life

If Marco idealized his description of the Khan's personal appearance, he was extremely detailed and factual regarding his personal life. From him we learn that Kublai had four wives. There was no chief wife, and each one had her own court complete with over 10,000 attendants each. By these four wives, Kublai had a large number of sons--Marco says twenty--many of which Kublai placed in positions of authority in the various provinces of China. The eldest of these was Prince Chinkin, who died before Kublai did, leaving his son, Temur, to inherit the throne. Marco speaks quite highly of all of Kublai's sons, praising them for their intelligence and their ability, which he felt was quite natural considering that "their father the great Khan is the wisest man and the ablest in all respects, the best ruler of his subjects and of the empire and the man of the highest character of all that have ever been in the whole history of the Mongols."

Apart from his legal wives, Kublai had a huge number of concubines. Marco seems to have taken special interest in this aspect of the Khan's life and supplies his readers with many details concerning the selection of the ladies of the king's harem. Although Kublai could have had any woman in the empire, he showed particular preference for the women of the Turkish stock from a province called Kungarat north of the Great Wall. Every two years or so, the Kahn would send an envoy to this area who returned with group of four to five hundred of the most beautiful maidens, who were then subjected to a stringent selection process by which they were rated according to their beauty. Those who did not win this particular beauty competition remained however in the palace where they were "instructed in needlework, glove-making and other elegant accomplishments." Then, if some nobleman happened to be looking for a wife, the Khan would supply one of these women with a generous dowry and marry her off.

Hunting

If anything rivaled Kublai's appreciation for women, it was his love of hunting. Every year there were several royal hunts which were carried out on an almost unbelievably large scale. For instance, on the hunt that took place every spring, Kublai would appoint two men whose job it was to take care of the hunting hounds. Each of these men had 10,000 subordinates and altogether they managed more than 10,000 hounds. Apart from these there were more than 5,000 falcons and hundreds of leopards, tigers and other animals. Marco, who must have joined Kublai many times on these hunts, urges his readers to try to imagine the scene:

> What a sight it is to see the hunt and the performance of the hounds and hunters! For you must picture that, while the great Khan rides out hawking, with his barons across the open country, then packs of these hounds are to be seen advancing on either side, hunting bears and stags and other beasts, so that it is truly a fine sight to see!

Not only did he take his animals, Kublai also took more than 10,000 of his officials and concubines along as well. Kublai himself stayed in huge portable palaces, made with supports of skillfully carved bamboo the outside of which was covered with lion-skins and the insides lined with ermines and sables. In fact, it was a city unto itself, as Marco tells us:

> Round (the Khan's) tents are pitched all the other tents, also well-designed and appointed. And for the...falcons and other birds and beasts there are tents in vast numbers. What need of more words? You may take it for a fact that the number of people in this camp almost passes belief. You might well fancy that the Khan was here in residence in his finest city. For it is thronged with multitudes from all parts. His whole household staff is here with him, besides physicians and astrologers and falconers and other officials in great numbers, and everything is as well ordered and in his capital.

Court Banquets

The courts that Friar John and Friar William saw at Karakorum were rather crude affairs often held in huge felt tents which, although draped in gaudy gold cloths and expensive furs, could in no way compare to what Marco Polo saw in China. Kublai had adopted all of the regalia and protocol that was typical of the Chinese emperors and their Confucian traditions. (One of the uses he made of Chinese advisors was to help him make sure he got everything right.) Even Marco is hard put to describe the size and splendor of the great banquets over which Kublai presided like a semi-divine being. During these feasts, the Khan would sit in his robes of gold and silver elevated above the thousands of people gathered below who were all seated according to rank. When Kublai raised his cup to drink, the music played and the entire company would fall to its knees. Outside of this main hall was a room where the remaining participants would eat. Marco Polo tells us that over 40,000 people would eat in this outer area, among them the many envoys from all over Asia as well as the more remote parts of China who had come to pay homage and present gifts to the Khan.

In the midst of this opulent display of what was largely traditional Chinese ceremony (although on a far greater scale) there was an object that was a distinctly Mongol addition to the imperial court. This was a large coffer made of gold in which were placed golden vessels of every sort of wine and alcoholic drink. Although not quite as elaborate as the great silver tree at Karakorum, this wine vessel reflects a Mongol taste for liquor which was not at all common among the Chinese. Some scholars suggest that the Mongols used these huge feasts and drinking parties to ease the tension between the peoples of so many different races and creeds such as lived at the Khan's court. However it may be, Marco seems to have accepted these scenes of inebriation as completely natural, unlike Father William and Father John who were quite appalled at what they saw at Karakorum.

Kublai's Attitude Toward Religion

The Polos, as we have seen, felt it part of their mission to attempt to convert Kublai Khan. When the Mongol ruler had requested 100 Catholic priests to come to his court, Matteo and Nicolo had hoped that here was a possibility of converting him. However, Kublai pursued the policy of religious toleranance established by Chingis Khan and not only exempted all religious tolerance established from taxation but encouraged the building of thousands of new monasteries and temples over China, some of which were, as Marco tells it, "as big as cities." So, when the Polos attempted to convert him, he replied as follows:

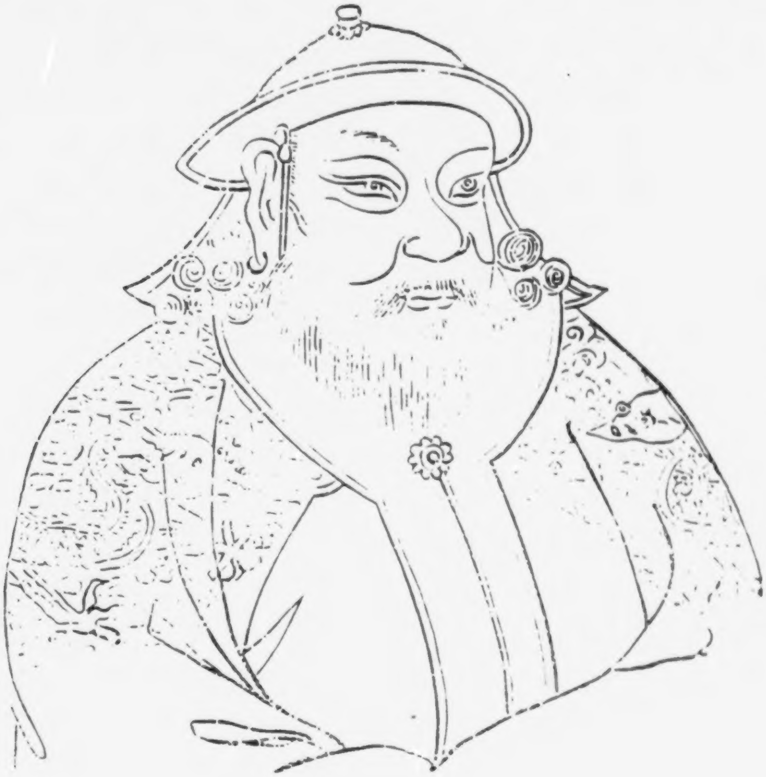
> There are four prophets who are adored and worshipped by all the world. The Christians say their God was Jesus Christ, the Saracens (say theirs is) Mohammed, the Jews (say theirs is) Moses and the Idolators (say theirs is) Sakyamuni Buddha, the first man of whom an idol was made. I honor and revere all four, and thereby also the one who is the most powerful in Heaven, and the most true, and I pray to him to aid me.

The picture we get here is of a rather enlightened man who is perhaps even deeply religious at heart. However, there is another side to the story. Despite his professed religious tolerance and his adoption of Confucian ritual in his court, Kublai showed a distinct preference for a form of Lamaist Buddhism which made use of magic, divination and secret ritual. In fact, Kublai surrounded himself with magicians and astrologers. Thus, it seems that the reason the Christians lost out is that they could not perform the feats of magic Kublai so admired. In his book, Marco Polo has Kublai speak for himself:

> How would you have me become a Christian? You see that the Christians in these parts are so ignorant, that they achieve nothing and can achieve nothing. And you see, too, how these Idolators do all they will, and when I sit at the table, the cups standing in the middle of the room, full of wine or drinks or other things come to me without anyone touching them, and I drink from them. They oblige bad weather

> to go whither they will and perform many marvels. And, as you know, their idols speak to them, and prophesy all they wish to know. But if I turned to the Christian faith and became a Christian, then my barons and other men who did not turn to the same faith, would say to me, "What reason had urged you to be baptized and to follow the faith of Christ? What power or miracle have you seen in (his followers)?

Marco Polo, it seems, was not disturbed by Kublai's refusal to convert to Christianity. For in all other respects, Kublai appeared to Marco to be an ideal ruler. However, Marco's unqualified admiration of Kublai led him to mistakenly attribute much of the greatness he saw in China to the Mongol Khan's enlightened rule. We now turn to Marco's descriptions of this greatness and the wonders of thirteenth century China.



A portrait of Kubilai Khan, from a Chinese engraving.

CHAPTER SIX

PALACES AND CITIES

What Marco Polo describes of Chinese culture and civilization, are largely aspects that could be compared or contrasted with things he had seen back home in Venice. (We must remember that Marco Polo tailored his observations for his Medieval European audience.) Having been raised in one of the biggest and most cosmopolitan European cities of his time, Marco could not help but be impressed by China's cities. For one thing, he was amazed at the size and density of the population. (Venice had 100,000 inhabitants; Hangzhou, 1.5 million!) Marco Polo thus devotes many pages to extensive and admiring descriptions of China's cities, their palaces, temples, walls and towers. He was especially observant of architectural details, perhaps reflecting the fact that architecture was the dominant art of thirteenth century Venice. In this chapter we will focus on his descriptions of the summer and winter palaces, and the cities of Beijing and Hangzhou.

Shangdu: The Summer Palace

During the hot summer months of June, July, and August, Kublai Khan and his court would move, lock, stock, and barrel, to the summer palace in Shangdu. Located 350 miles northwest of Beijing on the Mongolian side of the Great Wall, it is possible that this is where Marco Polo first met Kublai in all his regal glory. In any case, his description of this palace and its grounds was so vivid that more than five hundred years later it inspired the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge to pen the famous lines of his poem called "Xanadu" which at one time, every English schoolchild had to memorize.

> In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
> A stately pleasure-dome decree
> Where Alph, the sacred river ran
> Through caverns measureless to man
> Down to a sunless sea.
> So twice five miles of fertile ground
> With walls and towers were girded round;
> And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills
> Where blossomed many an incense bearing tree;
> And here were forests ancient as the hills,
> Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.

Marco describes the palace which was made of stone and marble. Inside, its halls were gilded with gold along with paintings of the hunt and pictures of birds, flowers, and landscapes. Surrounding this marble palace was a great wall -- Marco says it was no less than sixteen miles long. Within this wall was a huge park filled with trees, flowers, running rivers and stocked with every imaginable kind of animal life. It was here that Marco first noticed Kublai's great love of the hunt, as described in the previous section, and mentions the great number of falcons kept by the Khan in this park alone:

> Of falcons alone there are more than two hundred.
> He goes himself once a week to see them in mew.
> And often enough the Great Khan rides about this
> walled park, taking a leopard with him and when
> the fancy takes him, he lets it go and with it takes
> a stag... and has it given to the falcons in mew.
> This the Great Khan does in amusement.

Here set up in the middle of the park, Marco also saw the huge, lavishly decorated portable palace which Kublai used on his royal hunts. The Imperial Hunting Grounds where these hunts took place were located east of Shangdu. Today there is nothing much left of what was this grand city, for when the Mongol rule in China was overturned by the Chinese Ming dynasty it was looted and burned to the ground.

Beijing: The Winter Palace

In 1215, Beijing, then known as Yenjing, was captured by Chingis Khan and largely destroyed. However, in 1264, Kublai Khan, now Great Khan of Khans, moved from the old Mongol capital of Karakorum to the site of the destroyed Chinese city, where he built a magnificent palace that was very different from the camp-court of the Mongol rulers in Karakorum. This palace was, in fact, built along a very old and very traditional Chinese model and was in all respects a marvel of Chinese-style architecture. Largely ignorant of Chinese tradition, Marco Polo did not realize this and saw this incredible palace largely as a reflection and a symbol of the great glory of Kublai Khan himself.

Marco Polo must have spent a lot of time in this palace during his seventeen years in China, and his description almost provides us with a guided tour of its marvels. The palace itself was surrounded by a series of concentric squares; the outer wall, lined by a deep moat and about six miles long on each side. The area inside the first wall was filled with Kublai's personal troops and his imperial guardsmen, numbering in the tens of thousands. Within the second walled precinct was stored Kublai's arsenal, "bridles, saddles, stirrups and all other kinds of harness for horses...bows, bow-strings, arrows and other things." Finally, in the center of this impressive display of military strength was the imperial palace. Raised above the ground level on a sort of podium, it must have been an amazing sight. Marco Polo offers the best description:

> The roof of the palace itself is very high. The walls of the halls and chambers inside are all covered with gold and silver and decorated with pictures of dragons and birds and horsemen and various breeds of beasts and battle scenes. The ceiling is similarly decorated -- nothing but gold and pictures everywhere. The hall is so vast and so wide that a meal might be served here for more than six thousand men. The number of chambers is quite bewildering. The whole palace is at once so immense and so well constructed that no in the world, granted that he had the resources, could imagine any improvement in design or execution. The roof blazes with scarlet and green and blue and yellow and every color, so brilliantly varnished that it glitters like crystal and the sparkle of it can be seen from far away. And this roof is strong and stoutly built to last for many a year. ...In the rear of the palace are extensive apartments, both chambers and halls, in which are kept the private possessionsof the Khan. Here is stored his treasure: gold and silver,precious stones and pearls, and his gold and silver vessels. And here too are his ladies and his concubines. In these apartments everything is arranged for his comfort and convenience, and outsiders are not admitted.

Chinese sources also mention the fact that the walls of Kublai's Chinese-style palaces were hung with expensive furs -- leopard and tigerskins, perhaps -- and the floors covered with thick felt rugs and carpets. These were carryovers from the Mongol imperial yurts and not part of the native Chinese decor. In short, although Kublai wholeheartedly adopted the splendor and regalia of the Chinese royal lifestyle, he retained some things which were of purely Mongol origin.

Beijing: The City

About one half mile northeast of Kublai's palace was the city of Beijing, which at that time had several names: Taidu, or "Great Capital", and Cambaluc, as Marco calls it, which comes from Khanbalig meaning "City of the Khan", Marco Polo tells us that shortly after moving his capital to Beijing, Kublai's astrologers informed him that the site would one day be the site of a vast rebellion against his rule. Therefore, the Khan immediately had a vast new city built at a short distance from his capital which he surrounded with fifty-foot high walls and to which he moved a large part of the population of the area. This vast city, completed in the summer of 1267, also built along Chinese lines, was laid out like a giant chessboard on the northern plain, its streets forming a regular grid pattern. The wall surrounding the city was twenty-four miles in circumference and could be entered by one of twelve massive gates, each of which was guarded by a thousand of the Khan's soldiers. The city itself was exceedingly well planned and beautifully laid out and Marco Polo was quite overwhelmed by it.

There was no European city that was even comparable to Beijing both in terms of design and in sheer density of population.

> I assure you that the streets are so broad and straight that from the top of the wall above one gate you can see along the whole length of the road to the gate opposite. The city is full of fine mansions, inns, and dwelling houses. All the way down the sides of every main street there are booths and shops of every sort. All the building sites throughout the city are square and measured by the rule; and on every site stand large and spacious mansions with ample courtyards and gardens...Every site or block is surrounded by good public roads; and in this way the whole interior of the city is laid out in squares like a chessboard with such masterly precision that no description can do justice to it.
>
> In this city there is such a multitude of houses and of people, both within the walls and without, that no one could count their number.

Marco also describes the great amount of trade and commerce which made the city one of the busiest and richest in China, not to mention the world.

> You may take it for a fact that more precious and costly wares are imported into (Beijing) than into any other city in the world. Let me give you the particulars. All the treasures that come from India -- precious stones, pearls, and other rarities -- are brought here. So too are the choicest and costliest products of Cathay itself and every other province. This is on account of the Great Khan himself who lives here, and of the lords and ladies and the enormous multitude of hotel-keepers and other residents and of visitors who attend the courts held here by the Khan. That is why the volume and value of the imports and of the internal trade exceed those of any other city in the world. It is a fact that every day more than 1,000 cartloads of silk enter the city; for much cloth of gold and silk are woven here.

Behind this impressive display of wealth and prosperity, there was another side of the story which Marco Polo seems to only have been partly aware of, if at all. For one thing, the trade and commerce in this city was largely in the hands of non-Chinese traders, usually Muslims from Central Asia. Many of these remained in China, serving Kublai Khan as tax collectors as well as running the government monopolies over salt, tea and other important products. While this state of affairs resulted in a temporary economic "boom", in the end it caused a tremendous pressure on the people of China as well as a great drain of assets out of China. Thus, the Khan and his official circles became increasingly richer and the mass of the people increasingly poorer. (As we will see, officials such as Kublai's financial minister Achmet, were part of this process of amassing revenues and wealth.)

Marco Polo does note the fact that Beijing was extremely well-policed, although he somewhat naively attributed the presence of the 1,000 guards at each of the city gates not to a "mistrust of the inhabitants" but rather "as a mark of respect to the Great Khan who lives in the city, partly as a check upon evil-doers -- although, because of the prophecy of his astrologers, the Khan does harbor certain suspicions of the people of Cathay." Marco also notices the strict curfew that was laid upon the citizens of this immense city:

> Every night there are guards riding about the city in troops of thirty or forty, to discover whether anyone is going about at an abnormal hour, that is (after the curfew). Next morning he is examined by the officials appointed for the purpose and if he is found guilty of the offense, he is punished according to its gravity with a proportionate number of strokes of a rod, which sometimes causes death.

However, the Beijing that Marco Polo saw was indeed a magnificent and extraordinary place. It was less than a decade old when he arrived, and already it was bustling with activity.

Hangzhou: City of Heaven

The Chinese have an old saying, "Heaven above, Suzhou and Hangzhou below." Marco Polo could not have agreed more. Located midway between the Yangzi River and the southeast coast, miles south of present-day Shanghai, Hangzhou was, and in many ways still is, the great economic and cultural center of South China. Unlike the flat, grid-like cities of the North, Hangzhou was built like Venice in a lush and fertile area of lakes, rivers and canals, which is perhaps why Marco Polo fell in love with it. The Venetian traveller devotes a great many pages to Hangzhou which he calls "beyond dispute, the finest and noblest city in the world." However, he did not seem to fully realize that the wealth and beauty of this city was a creation of the Southern Sung dynasty, the capital of which was Hangzhou. During the Southern Sung, (1126-1279), Hangzhou was already famous for its cultural sophistication, its exciting urban life and the density of its population, one and a half million people concentrated in an area of some eight square miles. To get an idea of what this means, consider that during the 13th century, the population of London was 25,000 and that of Paris only 50,000!

In Hangzhou, Marco was quite taken with the fact that all the streets were paved with stone or brick. (In fact, most of the highways in South China were paved and easy to travel.) The main street of Hangzhou ran from one end of the city to the other. It was a wide, paved thoroughfare with a strip down the middle filled with fine gravel under which were sewers which drained the water into nearby canals. Compared to the narrow, dirty streets of many

European cities, this was quite an achievement. Called the "Great Street," this thoroughfare as described by Marco Polo was filled night and day with carriages and pleasure-seekers dressed in silks and satins. At regular intervals, we are told, were large public squares which were filled three times a week with as many as 50,000 people, buying and selling goods of every kind and description. We quote Marco's lively description of one of these market days at some length:

> ...for there is every an immense abundance of every kind of victual such as, of beasts, fallow-deer, roebucks, stags, hares, and rabbits, and of birds, partridges, francolins, quails, chickens, capons, and more ducks and geese than one could ever tell, for so many are bred in that lake, that for a Venetian silver grosso, one has a couple of geese or two couple of ducks. Then there are the shambles, where bigger animals are slaughtered, such as the calves, oxen kids, and lambs, the flesh of which is eaten by the rich and the great...In those market squares there are ever vegetables and fruits of all kinds, especially certain very big pears, weighing ten pounds each, white as paste inside, and very sweet-smelling; at the proper season, there are very exquisite peaches, both white and yellow. Further, every day an immense quantity of fish is brought from the Ocean, to a distance of twenty-five miles upstream... when one sees that enormous quantity of fish, one would never think this it could all be sold. Yet in a few hours it is all gone, so great is the number of people used to living luxuriously, eating both fish and meat at the same meal.

Marco also describes at length the busy and bustling entertainment quarters, public baths, teahouses and other urban delights that filled the profusion of side streets leading off this main thoroughfare. Judging from his descriptions -- and they are quite accurate as they are based largely on an official account of the city which was sent to the Mongol general in charge of overthrowing Hangzhou in 1276 -- it is not surprising that Hangzhou was so well-loved by foreigners and Chinese alike.

Marco Polo had no doubt seen many bridges in Venice, but he was particularly impressed by those of Hangzhou.

> The city has 12,000 bridges, most of which are of stone, and a few of wood; but those that cross the principal canals and the Great Street are arched up so high, and are so cunningly built, that a large boat can pass beneath them without lowering its masts; yet carts and horses cross them, so well have the streets been kept level...

Unfortunately, Marco's figures cannot be right -- probably there were no more than 1,200 and more likely a lot fewer -- bridges in Hangzhou at this time. It is this sort of exaggeration that has given Marco his nickname, "il Milione," that is, the one who makes millions (i.e. adds an extra zero or two) of what is actually much less. This, however, is one of the rare cases in which Marco can be caught redhanded for most of his descriptions and figures are surprisingly accurate. In any case, the number of bridges in Hangzhou must have far outnumbered those in Venice to prompt such a statement.

It would be impossible to speak of Hangzhou without mentioning West Lake. This large lake located south of the city proper, was in many ways the glory of Hangzhou and for centuries it has been celebrated by Chinese poets and painters for its beauty. During the Southern Sung, it was extremely well taken care of and cherished. Lovely gardens and trees were planted on the banks, and elegant palaces and mansions, scenic monasteries and temples were built along its shores. When Marco Polo saw it, it was still a lovely place and Marco gives a long description of the beauty and the pleasures of West Lake. Here one could hire a gaily painted boat -- large or small as one desired -- completely furnished with fine tables laden with "excellent wines and delicious sweetmeats." Marco himself must have enjoyed this for he tells his readers:

> ...in very truth, sailing thus about the lake gives you greater pleasure and solace than any other you may have on this earth, for the lake stretches along one side of the city, all the size and beauty of which can be seen from the boats -- with all its palaces, and temples, monasteries and with its gardens planted with immensely tall trees, all along the shore.

Marco's descriptions of Hangzhou greatly impressed his readers and in many ways helped form the traditional Western images of the exotic East. The city was very much a Chinese city, although Kublai made sure he got a large amount of its revenues, and here Marco saw many things that were typically Chinese and which we discuss in the next chapter. However, it is doubtful that Marco Polo realized just how Chinese it was, for it continued to attribute its magnificence to Kublai Khan. Today, although the palaces and silk-lined carriages are gone, Hangzhou continues to be an important economic and cultural center where, most Chinese will tell you, goods are more well made, food is tastier and the women are more beautiful than anywhere in China.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PEOPLE, CULTURE, AND TECHNOLOGY

Given Marco Polo's privileged position and his inability to communicate in Chinese, it is no surprise that his understanding of the Chinese people and their culture was superficial at best. In fact, Marco Polo's observations on what are commonly considered to be unique characteristics of Chinese civilization are surprisingly scanty. For instance, Marco shows no interest in the arts for which the Chinese are famous--painting, calligraphy, drama or literature. And, although he shows a Medieval European's interest in architecture he was unaware of the fact that the buildings and cities he so admired were based on ancient Chinese architectual designs.

As for the Chinese people themselves, and especially the Chinese educated class living in the cities of the South, Marco again shows a superficial understanding. His descriptions are on a level one might expect more from a tourist visiting China on a whirlwind tour than from someone who lived there for 17 years. Despite its incompleteness, however, Marco Polo's account of the Chinese, their culture, and technology made a deep impression on his European audience, and is the source of images of the Chinese that live even today.

THE CHINESE

The gist of Marco's observation on the Chinese character is as follows:

> ...(Marco Polo) found the people of Cathay superior to all others in excellence of customs and depth of learning, for they are ever intent upon their studies and scientific pursuits. They speak well and clearly, they greet you courteously, with a smiling and pleasant face, and they sit at the table with gentlemanly elegance. And so it is with other things. They have great respect for their parents.

Here, Marco notes the qualities of love of learning, courtesy and filial piety, which have always been traditional Chinese ideals. In the city of Hangzhou, Marco further notes a great difference between the Mongols and the Chinese.

> The natives of Hangzhou are men of peace...They have no skill in handling arms and do not keep any in their houses. There is prevalent among them a dislike and distaste for strife or any sort of disagreement. They pursue their trades and handicrafts with great diligence and honesty. They love one another so devotedly that a whole district might seem, from the friendly and neighborly spirit that rules among men and women, to be a single household.

This extremely admiring and idealistic description of the Chinese of the southern cities is especially evident in Marco's observations on the young women of China:

> You must know that the young ladies of the province of Cathay excel in modesty and the strict observance of decorum. They do not keep watch at the windows gazing at passers-by or exposing themselves to their gaze. They do not offer a ready ear to improper stories. They do not gad about to parties and entertainments. If it happens that they go out to some respectable place, as for instance to the temples of their idols or to visit the house of relatives, they walk in the company of their mothers, not glancing brazenly about them but some of them wearing pretty hoods over their heads which obstruct their upwards view. On the way they always walk with eyes cast down in front of their feet. In the presence of their elders they are respectful and never utter a needless word--indeed they do not speak at all in their presence unless addressed.

What Marco Polo has described--with an obvious note of admiration--represents the traditional ideal of Chinese womanhood, an ideal that continued to be upheld until only very recently. However, Marco does not mention an element of this ideal which perhaps his Europeans would have found repugnant, that is, bound feet, a custom which was popular in China even up until the early 20th century when it was banned completely. When a Chinese girl was very young, each of her feet would be wrapped in tight bandages and reduced to the tiny size that was considered beautiful. During the time Marco Polo was in China, most of the young women he so admired had bound feet.

CULTURE

In Hangzhou in particular, Marco Polo noticed the great number of public bathhouses. Frequent bathing was a novelty both to the Mongols and to the travellers from Europe which is perhaps why Marco was so amazed:

> ...there are numerous cold baths, staffed by attendants of both sexes, who bathe the men and women who go there, for they are used from childhood to wash themselves with cold water at all seasons. In those baths they also keep some rooms for foreigners who would not eat unless they had previously bathed.

Food

Marco Polo does not seem to have been much of a connoisseur of food--at least he makes little mention of food in his book. He does note the rice wine, prepared with fragrant spices, drunk by the Chinese. However, he never once mentions tea although he travelled through the famous tea-growing provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Fujian and must have seen it drunk every day. Although it would one day become the staple of European households, in the thirteenth century it was completely unknown in the West.

Although we hate to dispel a cherished myth, most scholars agree that Marco Polo cannot be credited with introducing spaghetti into Italy. This idea probably arose from a passage that is found in only one of the many editions of Marco Polo's book:

> As for foodstuffs, they have plenty of them for they use for the most part rice and millet. They do not use bread, these people, but they simply boil these two kinds of grain with milk or meat and eat them...and wheat witn them does not give such increase (as in the case of the two grains mentioned) but what they reap they eat only in strips of "noodles" and other kinds of paste.

In all the other versions, the wheat is made into "pan-cakes" instead of noodles.

Religion

As we have seen, Marco Polo did not understand and perhaps was not even aware of the more philosophical forms of China's three traditional religions: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. He did, however, observe the rituals of popular Chinese religion as they were performed in many homes,

> And this is how they worshipped their gods. Each man keeps at home on one of the walls of his room, a statue representing the Supreme God of the Heavens, or else merely the god's name written on one of the walls. And they worship him as follows: They burn incense daily, raise their hands and gnash their teeth three times, praying the god to grant them good understanding and a long, happy, and joyful life...On the floor, they have another statue...who is god of the things of the earth, to whom they only pray for earthly things, for such namely as are born on this earth...they pray to him for fair weather, for the fruits of the earth, for children and for other things.

These little home altars can still be found in rural areas of Taiwan and were everywhere in China as well until 1949.

Art and Architecture

As we have noted, Marco Polo was most interested in architecture and devoted many pages to an elaborate description of the houses, palaces, walls, bridges and temples of China. Incredibly, he never discusses the Great Wall which had been completed ca. 221 B.C. and is certainly one of the wonders of the world. Perhaps Marco's Mongol hosts chose not to point out the wall to him because the Chinese had built it to prevent Central Asian nomadic warriors from invading China proper.

Marco was more interested in ornament than in structure or design. Of the many arts and crafts practiced by the Chinese, Marco mentions only the making of porcelain. The Yüan dynasty was, in fact, a great period for the making of ceramics and the new peace under the Mongols meant that they were exported to the other areas of the Mongol empire, especially to the Middle East where they were in great demand. However, the art which survived best under the Mongols was painting. The Southern Sung had been a golden age of painting--the landscapes and nature paintings produced during this period are considered some of the greatest masterpieces of world art. During the Yüan dynasty, this tradition continued in new and creative ways, producing a number of great masters. Even the Mongol Khans appreciated this painting and patronized a number of the famous artists of the period. Marco Polo, however, makes no mention of this. He also fails to mention the art of calligraphy which, closely akin to painting, also flourished during the Yüan and which even Father William had heard about in Mongolia.

Literature and Drama

Marco Polo makes little mention of literature, despite the fact that Hangzhou was the center of an extremely active and prolific literary life. Considering the fact that Marco did not know Chinese, this is not surprising. The Yüan period, however, was also known as the golden age of drama, and although Marco does mention the "jugglers who come and amuse the court," he otherwise seems oblivious to the many dramatic works being performed in the entertainment areas and marketplaces of the cities of the south, not to mention the courts of the Khan. Dramatic performances--in China always combined with song, music, dance and acrobatics--had been very popular during the Southern Sung in particular. During the Yüan, more and more members of the educated class--now largely excluded from the high official posts of the government and more free to pursue their own interests--plunged wholeheartedly into writing dramas. This combination of actors, storytellers, and educated writers, produced the hundreds of plays and dramas for which the Yüan is famous. Although these dramatic works were given a more definite structure, they were still semi-operatic, combining acrobatics, music and singing. Thus, although they almost invariably had typically Chinese theme--filial piety, fideltiy, loyalty--the musical and acrobatic element was something even the Mongols, who would not speak or read Chinese, could enjoy.

TECHNOLOGY AND OTHER INVENTIONS

Marco Polo in his description of the Chinese people, mentioned their "studies and scientific pursuits." However, he does not seem to have realized that most of the technological advances he saw in China--most of which were not yet known in Europe--were of Chinese rather than Mongol origin, and had been in use in China long before the coming of the Mongols.

Paper Money

Paper money had been introduced in China in the ninth century although it was not until the Southern Sung dynasty that it began to be widely used. During the Yüan, Kublai established a unified system of paper currency and began to print vast amounts of bills of every denomination. This money was good not only in China, but in Korea, Central Asia, and parts of Southeast Asia as well. Marco Polo was truly amazed that every single merchant in China was very happy to receive this currency in exchange for his goods and was especially impressed by the fact that while his subjects were using paper money, Kublai's imperial coffers were full of the "real" thing--jewels, gold and other precious items. This use of paper money greatly facilitated trade and commerce as long as it had sufficient backing. However, during the later years of the Yüan, great quantities of paper bills were printed without that backing and the tremendous inflation and depreciation that followed contributed to the collapse of the Mongol rule in China. Marco Polo, however, was not aware of all this. He describes for his readers how the rectangular shaped bills of varying lengths were cut from a paper made of the bark of the mulberry tree and then printed:

> When the money is all ready, the chief of these officers, especially deputed by the Khan, smears the seal entrusted to his keeping with vermilion, and presses it on the paper...Then that particular piece of money becomes authentic. And if anyone were to forge it, he would suffer capital punishment. The Great Khan has this money made in such great quantities so that he could pay with it for all the coins in the worlds.

Almanacs

At Kublai's court in Beijing, Marco notes the large number of astrologers and astronomical development. As we have seen, in China as well as Medieval Europe, astronomy was inseparable from astrology and the heavens were watched for signs of good and evil fortune. The Chinese had been doing this for thousands of years and it was the traditional responsibility of the Chinese emperor--a practice continued by Kublai--to issue an almanac every new year which, based on the observations of astronomical data drawn up by the Board of Astronomy, would set out for all the people of China the unfavorable and favorable days of the year to come. These almanacs were printed in great numbers and circulated throughout China. Marco often notes the reliance the people of China seemed to place in these astrologers:

> Thus, if anyone has proposed in his mind to undertake some important work or to go to some far place for trade or for some personal business, and wishes to know the outcome of the affair, he will go to find some of these astrologers and... he will predict what will happen to him in the future of good or of ill, according to the way in which the sky is disposed.

Both the almanacs and the paper money were run off in immense quantities from printing presses in Beijing, as were the large number of books of all kinds sold in the bookshops of Hangzhou. Woodblock printing had been used in China since the 9th century and movable type in wood, porcelain and copper had been in use since the 11th century. It was not until the fifteenth century that printing reached the West by way of Central Asia and the Near East. Thus, it is rather amazing that Marco Polo, seeing it in the thirteenth century, completely failed to mention it to his European readers!

Coal

Marco was quite taken by the Chinese use of coal, which he describes as follows:

> ...a kind of black stone, which is dug out of the mountains like any other kind of wood. These stones make no flame, except a little at the beginning when they are lit, like charcoal, and by merely remaining red hot they give out a great heat.

As a matter of fact, coal had been used by the ancient Romans to heat their baths and houses. Although it fell into disuse after the fall of Rome, it continued to be utilized in England and Scocland, although Marco Polo and Mediterranean Europe, had never heard of it before. Thus, Pope Pius (1405-1464), when he saw beggars at a church in Scotland rejoicing over the "stones" they were given to burn, declared it a miracle! The Chinese were using coal at least one century before Christ.

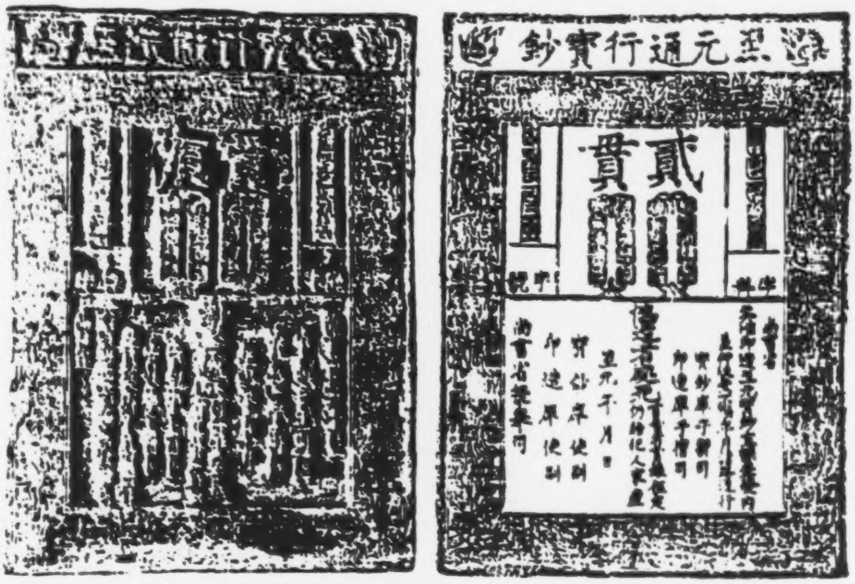
Other Things Marco Polo Didn't Mention

Apart from printing, Marco Polo also failed to mention several other important technological advances that were as yet not known in the West. Why Marco Polo fails to mention these and other important things remains a mystery, and has even led some skeptical scholars to doubt the veracity of the entire account! One of these was gunpowder which the Chinese had invented during the

Tang dynasty (618-907). Although originally used only for fireworks, eventually it was used for weapons and the Southern Sung troops fought the invading Mongols with cannons and other arms utilizing gunpowder. Marco also failed to mention the fact that the Chinese used sulpher matches to light their fires. Not until 1781 would a match of any kind be invented in Europe!

Between the eighth and thirteenth centuries there had been a great improvement of navigation, mostly by the people of South and West Asia. Thus, by the time of Kublai Khan, the ships used in maritime trade were very large and could carry several hundred men. Marco Polo, having been raised in a maritime city, was full of praise for these ships and he claimed that some of them had as many as 13 watertight compartments--a vast improvement over European ships of the time. However, Marco makes no mention whatsoever of the important instrument that was used to navigate these ships--the compass. The Chinese had known about magnetic polarity as early as the third century A.D. and a Chinese text indicates that the compass was used in the trade between China and the rest of Asia by 1119, several decades before it was introduced to Europe by the Arabs.

Although Marco Polo did not mention a lot of things, there is no doubt that thirteenth century China was indeed a remarkable place, and the most technologically advanced civilization in the world. However, beneath the grandeur that Marco Polo describes so well, there were tensions, military and political, that would eventually lead to the destruction of Mongol rule in China.



A Mongol-dynasty woodblock for printing paper money.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONFLICTS WITHIN AND WITHOUT

As Great Khan of the Empire, Kublai was faced with three major political and military threats, all of which required that he maintain strong, well-organized and well-trained troops. Thus, in many ways the Mongol position in China was, despite the palaces and hunting grounds, more of a military encampment than anything else. The first threat came from the Chinese people themselves, whose fierce resistance to Mongol conquest ended only in 1279, several years after Marco Polo's arrival in China. The second threat was external, coming from the more traditional Mongols of Central Asia, who bitterly opposed what they saw as Kublai's adoption of Chinese ways and customs. They felt this was undermining Mongol power throughout Asia. The third conflict was that created by Kublai's aspiration to complete Mongol supremacy over Asia, and the sometimes fierce resistance of China's neighboring peoples to submit to this.

Marco Polo was very aware of all three of these areas of conflict, and devotes a great number of chapters to describing the many battles, feuds, and invasions that marked Kublai's rule. Marco sometimes played a direct role in these events, but his descriptions are marked by a mixture of fact, hearsay, legend, and fantasy. (We must remember that Marco, and his storyteller Rusticello, were not bothered by the rules of modern historians.) Even with these faults, the accounts provide us with valuable insights into this historical area. So we will look briefly at Marco Polo's descriptions of three key events, especially since they are mentioned in the TV miniseries.

Achmet: Revolt and Repression

Although Marco Polo was generally on the side of the Mongols, he could not help but notice signs of the deep tension that existed between some Chinese (particularly the former elite) and their Mongol overlords.

> All the Cathayans (Chinese) detested the Great Khan's rule because he sent over them governors who were Tartars (Mongols), or still more frequently, Saracens (Muslims), and these they could not endure, for they were treated by them just like slaves. You see, the Great Khan had not succeeded to the dominion of Cathay by hereditary right, but held it by conquest; and thus, having no confidence in the natives, he put all authority in the hands of the Tartars, Saracens or Christians who were foreigners in Cathay.

It would seem that under these conditions, the Chinese would simply rebel, and they did from time to time, finally succeeding in overthrowing Mongol rule in

1368. Still, the Chinese did not revolt against the Mongols just because they were Mongols, but also because of the corruption and exhorbitant taxation of the rulers. One such revolt was aimed at cruel and unjust practices of Kublai's minister for financial affairs, a Muslim by the name of Achmet.

As we have seen, Kublai entrusted most key administrative posts to non-Chinese. Being rather ignorant of the financial aspects of the empire, he put these responsibilities almost entirely in the hands of Achmet. Undoubtedly a financial genius, Achmet was also extremely corrupt, and from 1270 to 1282 he engaged in extortion and blackmail on a scale which is difficult to imagine. An avaricious and lustful man, it was not long before no man dared cross him and no man's wife was safe from his advances. Kublai was only concerned that Achmet collect the largest amount of revenue with the least expense, and so was blind to the evil-doings of his finance minister.

> And every time he wished to encompass the death of someone he hated, whether justly or unjustly, he would go to the Khan and say, 'Sire, such a man is worthy of death, for he has offended your Majesty in such a way.' The Khan would say, 'Do what thou thinkest fitting' and straight away he would have the man put to death.

Finally, unable to endure it any longer, and having no other recourse, the people of Beijing "decided to kill him and to rebel against the government of the city." Marco tells in great detail how the plans were laid and carried out, and how finally Achmet was killed. Although this revolt was directed against a single man, it was also a revolt against the many corrupt officials in Kublai's administration, and evidently a great number of Chinese were involved. Kublai realized this, and the savage repression of this revolt reveals how Marco Polo's benign ruler could become as violent and formidable as his predecessors in repressing actions likely to undermine the unity of his empire. Marco Polo described how, as soon as the plot was discovered, a proclamation was issued that anyone found out of doors would be killed on the spot. He then tells what happened.

> The Cathayans (Chinese), seeing that Tartars (Mongols) had discovered their plot and that they were left without a head, one of their leaders being killed and the other captured, stayed quietly in their homes and hence could give no sign to the other cities to carry out their plan of rebellion. Kogatai (the Mongol official) promptly sent couriers to the Great Khan with a full account of everything that had happened, and received in reply an order to conduct a thorough investigation and punish the guilty according to their deserts. When morning came, Kogatai examined all the Cathayans and put to death many whom he found to be ring-leaders in the conspiracy. And

> the same thing was done in the other cities, when it came out that they were involved in the crime.

Marco is slightly critical of this reaction, in which a large number of Chinese both in the capital and the provinces were killed, and tells his readers how he himself intervened to convince the Khan of the misdeed of Achmet, and how Kublai eventually had the body of his former financial minister thrown to the dogs. This was more a symbolic act than anything else, for Kublai's next minister, also a Muslim, proved to be equally corrupt. However, Marco Polo seems to have accepted it as the gesture of an understanding and magnificent ruler and, as is often the case in his book, is reluctant to criticize him openly.

Kublai's Armies

From the above account, it is clear that Kublai felt the need to maintain his armies in good working order at all times. In fact, Mongol garrisons were stationed in all the major urban areas to prevent revolt and crush it wherever it might arise. Even Marco Polo mentions an incident in which a few drunken Mongol soldiers were killed by the Chinese citizens of a town on the Yamzi, and how the whole town was decimated in retaliation. Although Kublai's armies were made up of both Mongol and Chinese soldiers, there was a clear distinction made between them. For one, all the commanders and officers were members of the Mongol aristocracy and were specifically chosen for their loyalty and prowess. The Mongol portion of the fighting men was all cavalry, trained in the traditional Mongol techniques of warfare (the Chinese were not). In short, the Mongols kept China under an iron hand, and it was not until the 1340's, when Mongol power in China had become considerably weakened, that Chinese revolts met with some success. In the meantime, Kublai pressed into service tens of thousands of Chinese and men from other subject states, such as Korea, who were sent into Burma and Indochina, and across the sea to Japan and Java, in one last effort to enlarge what was already the largest empire the world had ever known.

The Invasion of Japan

Marco Polo devotes two chapters to a detailed description of Kublai's attempted invasion of Japan. It is due to these chapters that the Christian West first heard of Japan, and Marco's fanciful description of the gold and riches of this island would later inspire explorers to set out in search of this glittering world.

> The ruler of the island...has a very large palace entirely roofed with fine gold. Just as we roof our houses or churches with lead, so this palace is roofed with fine gold...Moreover all the chambers, of which there are many, are likewise paved with fine gold to a depth of more than two finger's breadth. And the halls and the windows and every part of the palace are likewise adorned in gold. All in all I can tell you that the palace is of such incalculable richness that any attempt to estimate its value would pass the bounds of the marvelous.

Marco Polo says that it was because of this wealth that Kublai desired to conquer Japan. This, however, reveals Marco's ignorance of the true motivation behind Kublai's invasion, which was to force the ruler of Japan and his people to acknowledge Mongol supremacy, and so extend even further the great Mongol empire. In fact, Kublai probably knew that the island was poor in natural resources, and besides, he was not interested in wealth, having already as much as he could possibly desire. If anything, he was interested in acquiring new dominions which he could hand over to his numerous sons. The rumors of gold palaces were most likely spread on purpose to offer an incentive to the thousands of Chinese and Korean troops which Kublai employed on these grand-scale invasions. Because Marco reports this information as factual, many scholars suspect that he did not actually go to Japan, although he was in China during the last expedition made in 1281. At any rate, his description of the invasion itself is quite accurate and reveals the causes for what was one of Kublai's most outstanding defeats.

The story of this invasion, briefly, is as follows. As early as 1268, Kublai sent a group of envoys to the ruler of Japan, demanding submission. The Japanese, however, ignored the threat completely, confident of the protection afforded by their insular situation and the strength of their samurai soldiers. This happened several times and finally, in 1274, Kublai decided to launch an invasion. His troops, made up mostly of Korean and Chinese soldiers, captured the islands of Tsushima and Iki which lie halfway to Japan, and then proceeded to land in Kyushu. the southernmost of Japan's main islands. After a bitter and prolonged battle in which Kublai's troops were gaining the upper hand, a sudden storm coupled with a shortage of arrows forced them to retreat, afraid of being marooned on the island. This retreat was not accomplished without a great loss of life -- Korean records place the number at 13,000.

Undaunted, in 1281 Kublai gathered together a huge army of more than 150,000 men (only 40,000 of them Mongols) and ordered an invasion fleet of

600 ships built. Landing on the Japanese coast a second time, the fighting was extremely fierce and, because of strong Japanese resistance, may well have gone on for some time, were it not for the intervention of nature. A huge and savage typhoon suddenly rose and sunk or smashed hundreds of Mongol ships, drowning tens of thousands of soldiers. This wind the Japanese called the Kamikaze, meaning divine wind. (The Kamikaze pilots of World War II took their name from this episode in history, hoping that they too could miraculously win against huge odds.) What was left of the armies of the Khan -- mostly non-Chinese commanders who had the best ships -- returned to China in defeat. For the rest of his life Kublai intended to return to Japan to teach it a lesson, but the truth was that this defeat marked the limits of the Mongol expansion in the East.

Dissension Among the Mongols: Caidu vs. Kublai

Kublai Khan was not only Emperor of China, he was also Great Khan of a huge empire, of which China only formed a part. This Mongolian Empire was divided into four areas, or khanates, each ruled by the descendants of the families of Chingis Khan's four sons. The Persian Khanate included Persia, Mesopotamia, West Turkestan west of the Amu Darya, and western Afghanistan. The Central Asia Khanate consisted of the Tarim Basin, Dzungaria, West Turkestan east of the Amu Darya and eastern Afghanistan. The Khanate of the Golden Horde possessed southern Russia and Kazikstan. Finally, the Great Khanate, for which Kublai was immediately responsible, comprised Mongolia, Manchuria, Korea, China, and the major part of Tibet.

After the death of Chingis Khan, these four khanates became increasingly independent and self-sufficient, although they always acknowledged the supremacy of the Great Khan. The Persian Khanate became more and more influenced by the advanced civilization it had conquered, and began to slowly exchange their purely Mongol traditions for those of Persia. Kublai did much the same thing in China, where he moved his capital to Beijing and built a splendid royal city along the Chinese lines. The rulers of the remaining Khanates, however, retained their nomad traditions, and eventually conflict between these two opposing groups broke into war.

The rivalries had begun as early as 1259 when Kublai, not waiting around for the brothers who had equal claim to the position of Great Khan, had himself elected. Finally, his brothers yielded, but the family resentments continued and were finally taken up by Caidu, Kublai's nephew, who belonged to the family of the Central Asian Khanate. Caidu bitterly opposed the Chinese influence on the Mongols under Kublai, which he felt would weaken the empire. Caidu, known for his leadership in politics and war, began to organize resistance by getting together a formidable coalition of Mongol princes and armies ready to oppose Kublai. He then found an ally in his cousin, Nayan, who was lord of the area that is today North Manchuria. Nayan, a Nestorian Christian, was a bitter enemy of Kublai and readily offered his services to Caidu. Thus, once Caidu had gathered his forces in Central Asia, he moved to Nayan's domain, which was closer to the borders of China, and could serve as a military base from which to attack Kublai.

Marco was quite aware of this conflict between Caidu and Kublai, for he tells his readers, "know then that there had never been any agreement between Caidu and the Great Khan." Faced with this threat at the same time he was trying to carry out his plans for invading Burma and then Japan. these dynastic feuds were a constant thorn in Kublai's side. For one thing, they kept Asia in a state of unrest. For another, the dominions of Central Asia, where Caidu was based, were at the very center of the continent and controlled the entire system of trade and communication between China and the West. Also, although Kublai had far more power, Caidu's troops were made up of extremely well-trained soldiers, and Kublai could not afford to ignore them.

Finally, Marco Polo was not himself present at this battle, but his account, despite literary trappings, accords with the versions found of it in other Asian sources, direct information of these dramatic events. In his book, Marco tells us how Kublai, when he heard of Caidu's plan to attack, secretly assembled 360,000 cavalry and 100,000 infantry. Since the rest of his armies were far away on campaigns of conquest, his forces were made up of "his falconers and other members of his personal bodyguard." Consulting his astrologers, who assured him of victory, Kublai set out to the great plain in the north where Nayan and Caidu's armies were amassed. Kublai evidently caught Nayan still sleeping in his tent, because he travelled so stealthily. Marco then gives his readers an account of how Kublai prepared for the battle that would finally put an end to the threat posed by Caidu and his ally, Nayan.

> ...When the day of battle dawned, the Great Khan suddenly appeared on a mound that rose from the plain where Nayan's forces were bivouacked. They were quite at their ease, like men who had not the faintest suspicion that anyone was approaching with hostile intent. Indeed they felt so secure that they

> had posted no sentries around their camp and sent out no patrols to van or rear. And suddenly there was the Great Khan on the hill I have mentioned. He stood on the top of a wooden tower, full of crossbowmen and archers, which was carried by four elephants wearing stout leather armor draped with cloths of silk and gold. Above his head flew his banner with the emblem of the sun and moon, so high that it could be clearly seen on every side. His troops were marshalled in thirty squadrons of 10,000 mounted archers each, grouped in three divisions; and those on the left and right he flung out so that they encircled Nayan's camp in a moment. In front of every squadron of horses were 500 foot-soldiers with short pikes and swords. They were so trained that, whenever the cavalry proposed a retreat, they would jump on the horses' cruppers and flee with them, then when the retreat was halted, they would dismount and slaughter the enemies' horses with their pikes. Such then, was the formation in which the Great Khan's forces were drawn up around Nayan's camp in readiness for battle.

Within these areas of conflict -- between Mongols and the Chinese, between the Mongols and China's bordering states, and among the Mongols themselves -- were the seeds of the destruction of the Mongol Empire as Marco Polo knew it. But Marco Polo was not to see the fall of the empire. He returned to Venice before that event occurred.

EPILOGUE

Missions to China Continue

At just about the same time as the Polos' ship was pulling into the port of Venice, another Italian traveller was dropping anchor on the southern coast of China. Friar John de Montecorvino, an Italian Franciscan, was the first of a series of missionaries who preached and travelled in China during the first half of the fourteenth century. Arriving in Beijing in 1295, Friar John soon obtained the Khan's permission to establish a church in the capital city, and soon had made about 6,000 converts -- mostly non-Chinese foreigners. In 1307, Friar John was appointed archbishop of Beijing and thereafter made considerable progress, establishing churches in major cities like Quanzhou and Yangzhou. This work continued and even flourished until 1368 when the Mongols were overthrown.

Another visitor to China was an Italian Franciscan by the name of Friar Odoric of Pordenone, later canonized as a saint. Leaving Venice sometime around 1314-1318, Friar Odoric travelled by way of the Black Sea, Ceylon and Sumatra, reaching China around 1324-1325. He stayed in Beijing for three years and then returned to Venice in 1330, travelling via Central Asia. Upon his return, Friar Odoric dictated an account of his journey to a fellow friar. This account was by no means as extensive and detailed as that of Marco Polo. In fact, it is often a bewildering confusion of fact and fantasy. However, it was fairly popular during the Middle Ages, and in it we find the first references in the West to things which Marco failed to mention. For instance, Friar Odoric mentions the Chinese custom of foot-binding, as well as the long fingernails of the gentleman-scholars of China, who grew them so long in order to show their contempt for manual labor.

The last major European traveller of this era to China was Friar John de Marignolli. Sent by Pope Benedict, Friar John travelled through South Russia and Turkestan and reach Beijing in 1342. Upon arriving, he presented the Khan with a large Western horse as a gift. In 1347, Friar John left China and, travelling through India, reached Europe in 1353. He, too, wrote an account of his journeys.

We see, then, that the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw a rather large number of European travellers to the East. Many of these were missionaries and most of them left accounts of one sort or another of their experiences in Asia. There were also many merchants who came to the Chinese ports -- especially during the fourteenth century -- but they left no record of their travels and so have been lost to history. Marco Polo, neither merchant nor missionary, is therefore somewhat of an exception, just as his account is much more extensive and informative than any of the others. However, all of these travellers shared the fate of being disbelieved or simply ignored by their contemporaries, and it would be several centuries before the wealth of information they brought to the West would be somewhat appreciated. In the meantime, China as Marco Polo and others had known it completely disappeared.

The Fall of the Mongols

In 1294, the year before Marco Polo arrived back in Venice, Kublai died. Succeeded by his grandson, Temur, an able and intelligent man, China continued to prosper, but by 1307 the Mongol hold on China had begun to weaken. During the next quarter of a century, there were seven different Khans, none of them very effective. Finally, in 1328, open civil war broke out between the various Mongol princes. This inner dissension came at a time when China was beset by other serious problems. There had been a number of floods along the Yellow River, resulting in a great agricultural loss and widespread famine. Moreover, the Mongol rulers had been printing more and more paper money which, although it had once stimulated trade, now was issued without any backing. As a result, there was a steady depreciation of paper money and it was no longer accepted for tax payments. All of this hit the Chinese peasantry with particular force, and there was soon a rash of revolts and rebellions. Because the Mongols were severely divided within themselves, they could not control the spread of rebellion, and finally, in 1368, the last Mongol emperor -- an inept man addicted to wine and women -- was overthrown, and a new Chinese dynasty established; the Ming, which lasted until 1644.

Although there continued to be some contact with the West during the Ming dynasty, there was a growing hostility towards everything alien. Although this was partly a reaction to Mongol rule, it slowly crystalized into a lack of interest in anything non-Chinese (i.e., barbarian) -- whether trade or religion, and by the fifteenth century there was little direct contact with the West. In fact, from a Chinese perspective, Marco Polo's visit was but a small footnote in the vast sweep of Chinese history. However, for Europe it had much greater significance.

The Influence of Marco Polo's Book on Medieval Europe

The story of Marco's adventures in Asia no doubt spread quickly by word of mouth among the Polos' family and friends and perhaps much of the population of Venice as well. However, Marco's book did not enjoy as mucn popularity. One of the reasons, of course, is that there were only a limited number of hand-copied manuscripts -- eighty in all -- and these apparently were not widely circulated. Nor did they elicit much response. In fact, there were only four or five contemporary references to Marco Polo, and Dante, the great poet who lived for twenty-three years after Marco's work was written, never once alluded to him.

It would seem, then, that during his own time, Marco's book was received mainly as a book of exotic and marvelous tales of the East, but that little serious attention was paid to it. By the same token, the vast amount of new facts about the earth's surface brought back by these travellers had little effect on Medieval geographers.

Geography in the Middle Ages was extremely unscientific and very undeveloped, and the accepted view of the world was a traditional one that had been handed down over the centuries and was sanctioned by the Church. In this view, the earth's surface was represented as filling in the greater part of a circular disc with a vast ocean surrounding it. Basing themselves on Biblical allusions, the geographers placed Jerusalem at the center of this disc. Paradise was located in the extreme east, because in Genesis it was written that the Lord planted a garden eastward in Eden. As for those areas of the earth that they could not identify, they were filled with monsters, golden griffins and other creatures of legend and myth (see maps, p. 78).

Medieval geographers made little attempt to reform these views by searching for accurate information or by making use of the information brought back by travellers such as Marco Polo. In fact, not until 1375 was there a map which made extensive use of Marco's book -- the famous Map of Catalan. In this map, China was for the first time represented as a great empire occupying the southeast part of Asia, and Sumatra, Burma, Indochina, and part of India were placed in a fair approximation to their correct form and position. In fact, the Map of Catalan might be said to be the picture of the world, and especially of Asia, as Marco Polo conceived it. However, for all its advances, it was still a rather confusing map with strange place names, and it greatly underestimated the size of the world.

It was not until the fifteenth century and the beginning of the Age of Discovery, that Marco Polo's book was finally recognized as the descriptive account it was meant to be. The most famous of these fifteenth century explorers, Christopher Columbus, was excited by Marco's descriptions, and carrying a well-marked copy of Marco's book, set out in search of the riches of the East. However, the geographical distortions inherent in Marco's view of the world, and the maps which were based on it, made Asia seem much closer than it actually was, and, more importantly, it did not account for two important bodies of land -- the West Indies and the Americas!

APPENDIX A

"MARCO POLO" TV MINISERIES

APPENDIX A

"MARCO POLO" TV MINISERIES

1. SYNOPSIS

Editorial Note: The dates and times listed are tentative and subject to change.

Part One (Sunday, May 16, 8-11 p.m.)

Marco Polo has returned from China and is a captain of a Venetian navy ship. During a sea battle he is captured and put in a prison cell in Genoa. Here he meets Rusticello, a writer of romances, and begins to tell his story.

The movie then flashes back to the return of Marco's father, Niccolo and his Uncle Matteo, from a 10-year trip to China. The Polos have returned with a message from Kublai Khan of China to the Pope. Although the Pope supports the Polos and their request for trade agreements and missionaries to China, the Patriarch of Venice does not. Since the Papacy has been vacant for three years and only the Pope can make the final decision, the Polos decide to return to China empty-handed. This time, they decide to take Marco along because he became involved in a scandalous affair with a courtesan. Just as they arrive in the Holy Land, their friend, Teobaldo Visconti, is chosen as the new Pope (Gregory X) and sends two learned monks with the Polos. Travelling through Armenia, the caravan -- thirsty and tired -- is captured by a band of Muslim warriors and face imminent execution.

Part Two (Monday, May 17, 9-11 p.m.)

The Polos are released from the Muslim prison and continue to China undaunted. However, Marco becomes ill with the black plague and so the party rests in the mountains of Afghanistan for awhile. Then, taking up their journey once again, they encounter an avalanche which separates them. Later they are reunited in a Tibetan monastary, where Marco learns how to meditate.

The Polos then cross the Gobi Desert, but just before they arrive at the court of Kublai Khan, they are attacked by a band of Mongol warriors who are unaware that they are under the protection of the Khan.

Part Three (Sunday, May 16, 9-11 p.m.)

The Polos finally arrive at Shangdu, the summer palace of Kublai Khan. Marco soon becomes a favorite of the Khan and the other officials. Phags-Pa, Kublai's 'Keeper of the Records,' becomes jealous of Marco. Marco makes friends with Kublai's eldest son, Chinkin. However, when Marco saves Prince Chinkin's life after he has an epileptic seizure, he almost loses his own life because the Prince's illness is a forbidden secret. When the entire royal court returns to Beijing, the winter capital of the Khan, Marco meets Achmet, a sinister Turkish-born regent to the Great Khan, who assures the Polos of his friendship.

Part Four (Wednesday, May 19, 8-11 p.m.)

In the conclusion Achmet, who is worried about Marco's influence over Kublai, sends him on a business trip to South China. There Marco hears talk of revolution and meets Monica, with whom he falls in love. Mai Li, Monica's adopted sister, is kidnapped, and Achmet is suspected of being involved. There is a palace uprising and an attempt on Achmet's life, and Marco realizes that Monica was using him for her revolutionary purposes. Finally, a homesick Niccolo receives permission to return home and the Polos leave for Venice.

The story ends with a big battle between the aging Kublai and rebel forces led by Nayan, a Mongol Prince.

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APPENDIX A

"MARCO POLO" TV MINISERIES

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Editorial Note:

Although the Polos must have had incredible adventures both along their route and in China, Marco Polo rarely mentions such things in his book, which is written in a surprisingly dry and impersonal style. Thus, we know a great deal about where the Polos went and what they saw, but very little what they did, whom they met, or what happened to them. This is hardly an ideal situation for a television script writer. For this reason, some of the characters and events in the TV miniseries have been created from "between the lines" of Marco Polo's book, as well as from other historical sources. Some characters (e.g., Achmet) are based on actual historical figures; others are based on characters that could have existed during the time (i.e., Marco's servant, Jacopo). Still others have been created out of whole cloth for dramatic purposes (e.g., Marco's love interests, Caterina and Monica). As we have indicated, Marco tailored his book for the tastes and understanding of his potential audience; so the television series is geared to a modern American audience. The following list of the cast of characters in the miniseries and their historical equivalents (if any) is designed to help you distinguish fact from fantasy. (The name which appears in parentheses is that of the actor or actress who portrays the character in the TV series.)

NICCOLO POLO (Denholm Elliot): A merchant from a family belonging to the Venetian nobility and Marco Polo's father. In 1260, when Marco was only six, Niccolo and his brother Matteo went on a trading trip which unexpectedly took them to China and the court of the Mongol ruler, Kublai Kahn. They returned to Venice in 1269 with a message to the Pope from the Khan, and Niccolo found that his wife had died. In 1271, they again departed for China, this time taking Marco Polo with them. The Polos remained in China for seventeen years, returning to Venice in 1295, and Niccolo died not too long after.

MATTEO POLO (Tony Vogel): Niccolo Polo's brother and also a merchant. Matteo went on both trips to China, although Marco rarely mentions either his father or his uncle in his account of their stay in China.

MARCO POLO (Ken Marshall): Born in Venice in 1254, Marco's mother died when he was very young. He was probably raised by relatives, perhaps his Aunt Flora, Niccolo's sister. He received little or no formal education, but probably spent most of his time on the streets of a bustling and cosmopolitan Venice. In 1271, he left with his father and uncle for China, where he was presented to Kublai Khan. Marco soon became a favorite of the Mongol ruler and a personal informant. He remained in China with his relatives for seventeen years and then returned to Venice. Shortly after his return he became a naval commander of a ship in the Venetian navy and was captured in a battle with Genoa and thrown in prison. There he met Rusticello, to whom he dictated his book. After his release from prison in 1299, Marco returned to Venice, married, and had three daughters. He died in 1324. (For further details, see the Prologue.)

SIGNORA POLO (Anne Bancroft): Marco Polo's mother, who died shortly after her husband, Niccolo, left on a trading venture to the East. Niccolo remarried when he returned in 1269, leaving his new wife behind when the three Polos set out for the court of Kublai Khan in 1271.

AUNT FLORA (Sada Thompson): We know that Niccolo had several sisters, and someone like Aunt Flora was probably among them. However, we do not know for sure which aunt raised Marco after his mother died or what she was like.

RUSTICELLO: (David Warner): A writer of romantic novels from Pisa who had been thrown in prison after a battle between Genoa and Pisa which occurred a number of years before Marco Polo was captured. He wrote down Marco's account of his travels, using the form of his romance stories and writing in an Italianized French. Rusticello was released from prison shortly after Marco in 1298 and nothing is known of him after this. (See Prologue.)

BROTHER NICHOLAS (Tony LoBianco) and BROTHER WILLIAM (Hal Buckley): On their first visit to the court of Kublai Khan, the elder Polos were asked to return with one-hundred priests from Rome, However, Pope Gregory apparently could not find that many friars capable or willing to go to Asia, and so sent only two. One of these was Brother Nicholas of Vicenza. The second friar was Brother William, who had a reputation as an Arab scholar. Both brothers were frightened by the prospects of such a journey and returned before they had gotten very far. One contemporary source notes that they returned without making any report of the matter to Pope Gregory, who believed them to be still on their journey with the Polos.

JACOPO (Murray Abraham): Although it is possible that the Polos were accompanied by a number of servants, we do not know who they were or what their names were. Thus, Jacopo is a fictional, although possible, character.

CATERINA (Georgia Slowe): Daughter of a Venetian courtesan with whom the young Marco has an affair, Caterina is a purely fictional character for whom our sources provide no historical basis. Venice in the thirteenth century was an age in which morals were anything but strict and boys on the street grew up very fast. Thus, even if Marco did have an affair, it probably would not have been considered scandalous. However, it is far more likely that Marco was simply fascinated by the stories of far-away lands told to him by his father and uncle, and he begged to be taken along on their next journey.

KUBLAI KHAN (Ying Ruocheng): The Great Khan (i.e., Great King) of the entire Mongol Empire from 1260 to 1294. He was also the first Mongol ruler of the Yuan Dynasty in China, which lasted until 1368. Unlike previous Mongol rulers, Kublai adopted many Chinese customs, making use of Confucian protocol in his court and building huge, magnificent palaces and cities along Chinese models. However, he did not allow Chinese to serve in important government positions, and instituted a policy of discrimination against his Chinese subjects. Therefore, the Yuan is considered by the Chinese to be a dark period in history. However, Kublai's reign was one of great economic prosperity and relative peace. Marco adored Kublai and served as his informant for seventeen years. (For further details, see Chapters 3 and 6.)

PRINCE CHINKIN (Junghi Ishida): Kublai's eldest son. Kublai had at least 20 sons by his four wives. The eldest of these, and heir apparent to the throne, was Chinkin. Near his own palace in Beijing, Kublai had a magnificent palace built for his eldest son. We know that Chinkin died before Kublai and that his son, Temur, succeeded to the throne. However, there is no way of knowing whether or not he suffered from epilepsy or whether he and Marco became good friends.

ALI BEN YUSSOUF (Ian MacShane): A fictional character. We do know that the Polos barely escaped with their lives when they were attacked by bandits in the Persian desert. Marco says these bandits were called the Caraunas and that they were of mixed Mongol and Indian blood. Only seven members of the caravan, including the Polos, escaped and the rest were put to death or taken into slavery. Marco's account of this adventure is very short and surprisingly impersonal, and there is no evidence that they were put in prison. This is the only incident of this nature described in the book. The Polos carried with them golden tablets which marked them as envoys of the Khan. Any person who dared harm them and was caught would suffer great reprisals. These tablets were apparently respected and honored throughout the Mongol empire and thus the Polos were able to travel in relative safety -- with the exception of this one episode. In the television miniseries, the later attack by a group of Mongol warriors is not based on historical fact.

ACHMET (Leonard Nimoy): The Mongol rulers had little training in administering a vast empire and so often employed non-Mongols to help them. Achmet was a Turkish Muslim whom Kublai placed in complete charge of the financial affairs of China. A corrupt and lecherous man, Achmet took advantage of his complete power and soon earned the hatred of fellow-officials and especially of the Chinese who suffered under his extortions. Finally, Achmet was killed in a palace uprising. Although Marco describes this revolt and tells how he convinced the Khan that Achmet was indeed corrupt, we do not know anything more about their connection. Most likely, Achmet did not send Marco Polo on a mission, as Marco was personal informant of Kublai and his travels were all for the purpose of fact-finding. It is important to note that the revolt against Achmet was quickly suppressed by Kublai. Many Chinese were killed, and the rebellion never had a chance to become a wide-spread revolt against the Mongol government. (For further details, see Chapter 8.)

PHAGS-PA (James Hong): A Tibetan Buddhist priest who early on acquired great influence over Kublai and his court. Phags-Pa was apparently a deep thinker, a devout missionary, and an astute politician all rolled into one. He officiated as high priest of the court, performing elaborate ceremonies and enjoying special privileges. He also devised an "international" script with which to write Mongolian and all the other languages used in the Mongol court. Phags-Pa died in 1280. Marco makes no reference at all to this influential member of Kublai's court, although he no doubt heard of him, or met him.

BAYAN (Lao Li): Perhaps the most famous of all Mongol generals, Bayan led the Mongol troops of Kublai in the offensive against the Southern Sung Dynasty in South China and captured the city of Hangzhou in 1276. He was known not only for his military and political genius, but also for his humanity in battle. Thus, the conquest of China was not as devastating and bloody as Chingis' conquest of other parts of Asia.

CAIDU (Yu Shao Kang): Kublai's nephew and bitter enemy. Caidu had initially opposed Kublai's election to Great Khan (head of all the Mongol princes) and after Kublai's election continued to be a thorn in his side. Caidu was a proud Mongol who strongly believed in keeping the nomadic heritage intact. He felt that Kublai and other Mongol princes, who were adopting the "civilized" ways of their conquered subjects, posed a threat to the unity of the Mongol empire. Finally, Caidu got together a formidable coalition of Mongol leaders who believed as he did and attacked Kublai. However, Kublai, who was much stronger, emerged victorious. (See Chapter 8.)

NAYAN (Zhao Er Kang): Caidu's cousin and prince of what is today North Mancnuria. Nayan was a Nestorian Christian and a bitter enemy of Kublai's. When Caidu had gathered his force of Central Asian Mongol armies, Nayan offered his territory, which was closer to China, as a military base to attack Kublai. In 1288, a great battle described by Marco Polo, Nayan was killed by Kublai. (See Chapter 8.)

CHABI (Beulah Quo): The Christian wife of Kublai Khan. Scattered throughout Asia were groups of Nestorian Christian tribes. Alliances of marriage often united the family of Chingis and these tribes, especially the Nestorian Christian Mongol tribe called Keraits. Kublai's mother was from this tribe. However, we do not know whether any of Kublai's wives were Nestorian Christians or whether Marco was on familiar terms with them. (Nestorian Christians were an early sect of Christians who broke with Rome. See Chapter 4.)

MONICA (Kathryn Dowling): An Italian-born orphan raised in South China. Although Marco Polo often comments on the beauty of the women of the various places he travels to, there is never any mention of a romantic involvement. It is not unlikely that he did develop affection for a woman, seeing as he was a young and curious man when he came to China. However, Monica is a rather unlikely character for several reasons. First, although there may have been Europeans who went to the Mongolian court before it was moved to China or who were captured by the Mongols during the rampage of East Europe, it is highly unlikely that there were any Europeans living in South China at this time. Second, and more importantly, it should be noted that Marco had no sympathy for the Chinese hatred of their Mongol rulers. With the exception of the revolt against Achmet, Marco makes little mention of the Chinese hostility towards their Mongol overlords. Throughout his book, it is clear that he considers Kublai Khan to be the "perfect sovereign," and the Mongol rule over the Chinese to be completely legitimate. Furthermore, Marco apparently did not speak Chinese and had little opportunity to mingle with the Chinese on an intimate basis. Thus it is unlikely that he would have had a chance to become involved with a revolutionary group which, because of the strong Mongol military control of China, were almost nonexistent during this period. Not until after Kublai's death would the Mongol rule be seriously threatened and eventually toppled.

POPE GREGORY X (TEOBALDO) (Burt Lancaster): Teobaldo of Piacenza was a member of a famous Italian family, the Visconti, and a friend of the Polo family. Under Pope Clement IV, he had helped to promote the Crusades for the recapture of the Holy Land. On September 1, 1271, after three years in which the Pope's seat had remained vacant, Teobaldo was proclaimed Pope by the College of Cardinals. Because he was a soldier at the time, he was quickly ordained a priest, consecrated bishop and finally installed as Pope Gregory X. His election came just as the Polos (who had waited around for two years) were about to return to China without delivering Kublai's message. Pope Gregory X was a very ambitious man, and during his short period as Pope (1271-1276) was able to unify the churches of Europe. He also had a vision of spreading

Christianity into Asia, which is why he enthusiastically supported the Polos and appointed them Papal envoys to Kublai Khan.

THE DOGE (John Gielgud): Doge was the title of the chief of state of the Venetian Republic. Although they were elected, they were in many ways treated as kings and were installed in a glorious coronation ceremony at St. Mark's Cathedral. The Doge's job was to preside over the numerous councils and courts of Venice and to represent the city in foreign affairs. An important part of his job was to provide a magnificent display for visiting kings and their ambassadors, arranging lavish banquets in his huge palace.

We do not know that the Doge was directly involved in the mission of the Polos. For one thing, China was too far away for trade routes by land to be feasible. For another, Europe had only recently been threatened by the Mongols and was now interested in converting them to Christianity and enlisting them as allies against the Muslims. Trade was not yet a consideration. Finally, the Khan had sent the Polos back with a request for 100 priests but was not at all interested in trade, as there was very little Europe could offer that China did not already have. Thus, the Polos went to see Pope Gregory X their friend for assistance. It is unlikely the Doge was involved in their mission.

APPENDIX B

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA & EUROPE*

BC

27 -+- *Beginning of the Roman Empire*

53 -+- *Parthia defeated a Roman invasion; Rome first heard about silk*

112 -+- "Silk Road" opened across Central Asia linking China to the West

141 -+- Wu-di, Chinese Emperor, expanded Han power in East Asia

206 -+- (To 220 A.D.) Han Dynasty established

334 -+- *Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, Persia, India*

479 -+- Death of Confucius

486 -+- *Herodotus-first mention of China in Western Writings*

AD

23 -+- (To 79) *Pliny incorrectly recorded the origins of silk*

117 -+- *Greatest extent of Roman Empire*

150 -+- Buddhism reached China; first use of paper in China.

271 -+- Magnetic compass in use

304 -+- Xiong-Nu invaded China

476 -+- *Last Roman Emperor Deposed*

618 -+- China united under Tang Dynasty; gunpowder invented

711 -+- *Arab Invasion of Spain*

730 -+- Printing developed in China

800 -+- *Charlemagne crowned Emperor in Rome: Beginning of New Empire in West*

942 -+- Khitans, a nomadic people, overrun North China

1045 -+- Moveable type printing invented

1096 -+- *First Crusade*

1126 -+- Nomad tribes (the Jin) controlled North China; Sung Dynasty rule restricted to South China (Southern Sung Dynasty)

1167 -+- Chingis Khan born

1204 -+- *Fourth Crusade*

1206 -+- Mongols under Chingis Khan began conquest of Asia

1215 -+- Kublai Khan born;

1234 -+- Mongols destroy Jin Empire in North China

1236 -+- (To 39) *Mongols conquer Russia*

1241 -+- Mongols invade Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia

1245 -+- *Friar John De Plano travelled to Karakorum*

1253 -+- *Friar William Rubruck travelled to Karakorum*

1254 -+- *Marco Polo born in Venice*

1260 -+- *Niccolo and Matteo Polo left on first trip.*

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*Europe (Italics)

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA & EUROPE (continued)

AD

1262 -+- The Polo brothers arrive at the court of Kublai Khan

1266 -+- Niccolo and Matteo left China with Kublai's request that they return

1269 -+- *The Polos return to Venice*

1271 -+- *The Polos set out on second journey taking Marco with them; Teobaldo elected Pope*

1275 -+- The three Polos arrive in China

1276 -+- Hangzhou, capital of the Southern Sung Dynasty, fell to the Mongols

1280 -+- Official beginning of the Yüan Dynasty in China (1280-1368)

1292 -+- Polos left China by boat

1294 -+- Kublai Khan died; his grandson, Temur became Khan

1295 -+- Friar John de Montecorvino established a church in Beijing; *The Polos return to Venice.*

1298 -+- *Marco, as a Venetian naval officer, was captured at sea by the Genoese*

1299 -+- *Marco Polo and cellmate, Rusticello wrote The Travels of Marco Polo from prison.*

1324 -+- Friar Odoric travelled in China; *Marco Polo died in Venice*

1328 -+- Civil War broke out between the Mongol princes

1342 -+- Friar John De Marignolli arrived in Beijing

1368 -+- Last Mongol Khan was deposed--the Ming Dynasty was established

1445 -+- *Johannes Gutenberg made the first printed book in Europe*

1492 -+- *Columbus "discovered" the New World*

APPENDIX C

THE POLOS ROUTE TO CHINA

Introduction

In his book Marco Polo wanted to tell his readers about "all the great wonders seen, or heard of as true" that he had encountered in his travels through Asia. Unfortunately, he did not separate what he actually saw from what he only heard about. As a result, there is often no way of knowing which places the Polos actually travelled through! A great deal of scholarship and debate has been devoted to reconstructing the Polos' itinerary, but it is still not completely certain, and perhaps never will be.

In this section, we will trace only the major outlines of the route the Polos probably travelled, stopping at those places which scholars agree to have been part of the original route, and letting Marco Polo himself tell us a bit of what they saw. Where possible, we have given the modern equivalents of the place names, although some are simply no longer on the map.

From Jerusalem to Hormuz

Having received the blessing of Pope Gregory X, the Polos set out from JERUSALEM to AYAS (in modern-day Turkey), a Mediterranean port that was a point of departure for caravans heading inland. Here they assembled a caravan of their own and set off across the region of ANATOLIA (present-day Turkey) and ARMENIA (now part of the Soviet Union). It was in this area that Marco Polo noted with astonishment the use of petroleum, which had been used by the Romans to heat their cities but had then fallen into disuse. To Marco, it was a complete novelty!

> ...there is a spring from which gushes a stream of oil, in such abundance that a hundred ships may load there at once. This oil is not good to eat, but it is good for burning...

Leaving this region, the Polos turned south and, travelling through the CAUCASUS MOUNTAINS, came down into the city of TABRIZ (in present-day Iran). In 1272, when the Polos reached this city, it was the temporary capital of the Mongol Khans in Persia (Iran) and a bustling trade center. It was also the world's greatest pearl market.

Leaving TABRIZ, the Polos set out across the inhospitable and barren lands of eastern Persia, a route that at that time was constantly beset by brigands and bandits. As Marco tells us, were it not for the Mongol postal system, it would have been very dangerous indeed.

> Among the people of these kingdoms there are many who are brutal and bloodthirsty. They are forever slaughtering one another; and, were it not for fear of the government, that is the Mongol lordship..., they would do great mischief to travelling merchants. The government imposes severe penalties upon them and had ordered that along all dangerous routes the inhabitants at the request of the merchants shall supply good and efficient escorts from district to district for their safe conduct. Yet...unless the merchants are well-armed and equipped with bows, they slay and harry them unsparingly.

Riding on through a largely desert landscape, spotted with occasional groves of date trees, the Polos passed through the major trading center of YEZD, and then went on to KERMAN. Even today, KERMAN is an important city in Iran, and during the Polos' time it was a busy trading center. Marco Polo notes especially the fine turquoise and good quality steel for which this area was famous.

From KERMAN, the Polos set out on the long and exhausting journey down to the port of HORMUZ, on the Persian Gulf. On the way, they noted the fat sheep with tails weighing -- or so Marco Polo tells us -- thirty pounds! He also notes a species of large, white oxen with short, thick horns which Marco considered to be the most handsome creatures in the world.

The Polos did not like HORMUZ at all. It was an extremely hot place, and Marco makes special mention of the searing winds characteristic of this area.

> The fact is, you see, that in summer a wind often blows across the sands which encompass the plain, so intolerably hot that it would kill everybody were it not that when they perceive that wind coming they plunge into water up to the neck, and so abide until the winds have ceased.

The Polos were even more aghast at the ships they had been planning to take to China, which had no iron fastenings but were stitched together with thread made from coconut husks. As Marco puts it, this "makes it a risky undertaking to sail in these ships. And you can take my word for it that many of them sink!" The Polos quickly revised their plans and decided to take the land route to China instead of going by sea. Retracing their steps, they returned to KERMAN, where they got together a fresh caravan of horses and sturdy donkeys, and set out in a northerly direction through the wild and barren country of Central Persia.

From Kerman to Kashgar

The road from KERMAN was a long and wearisome one, stretching out over vast expanses of sandy wasteland punctuated only occasionally by small towns where carvans could stop for food and water. This area was also very dangerous and it was here that the Polos were accosted by bandits. Marco's account of this adventure is surprisingly short.

> I assure you that Marco himself narrowly evaded capture by these robbers...He escaped to a town called Kamsal; but many of his companions were taken captive and sold, and some put to death. Now let us turn to other matters.

When finally the Polos began to move out of this desert and into the rich and fertile land of what is today NORTHERN AFGHANISTAN, they were delighted! One of the major towns at the edge of the desert was SHIBARGHAN, and Marco's most vivid memory of this area was the sweet melons.

> It has a great plenty of everything, but especially of the very best melons in the world. They preserve them by paring them round and round into strips, and drying them in the sun; when dry, they are sweeter than honey, and are carried off for sale all over the country.

From SHIBARGHAN, the Polos passed through BALKH. For centuries a flourishing center of Greek, Buddhist and Islamic culture, it had been totally devastated by the armies of Chingis Khan and was nothing but a pile of rubble when the Polos saw it.

Leaving the ruins of BALKH, the Polos travelled along the frontier of what is today Northern Afghanistan and the Soviet Union. This was a very beautiful and fertile area, and Marco raves over it in his book. Finally, they reached the highland plateaus of BADASHAN, an area extending about twenty-five miles from present-day Faizabad in Afghanistan. Marco Polo had taken sick on this journey, and so remained in BADASHAN for over a year recuperating. He could not have chosen a better place!

> ...their cities and towns are built on mountain tops, or sites of great natural strength. It is characteristic of these mountains that they are of immense height...On the top are wide plateaux, with a lush growth of grass and trees and copious springs of the purest water, which pour down over crags like rivers into the valley below. In these streams are found trout and other choice fish. On the mountain tops the air is so pure and so salubrious that if a man...falls sick of a fever...he has only to go up into the mountains, and a few days rest will banish the malady and restore him to health.

After the long trek across the Persian desert, this must have seemed like Paradise itself. Although at this point in his account Marco describes the region of Kashmir, it is unlikely the Polos went there. Rather, they proceeded on to the great PAMIRS, a mountain range that was seemingly impassable and very forbidding. It is unclear whether or not the Polos actually crossed these peaks. It is possible that they went around through the great valley of the ALAI MOUNTAINS (in present-day Soviet Union) and from there down into KASHGAR. Whether or not the Polos actually crossed the Pamirs, Marco's description of them is very famous.

> The traveller...goes through mountains all the time, climbing so high that this is said to be the highest place in the world. And when he is in this high place, he finds a plain between two mountains, with a lake from which flows a fine river. Here is the best pasturage in the world; for a lean beast grows fat here in ten days. Wild game of every sort abounds. There are great quantities of wild sheep of huge size. Their horns grow to as much as six palms in length and are never less than three or four. From these horns the shepherds make big bowls from which they feed, and also fences to keep in their flocks. There are also innumerable wolves, which devour many of the wild rams. The horns and bones of the sheep are found in such numbers that men build stacks of them beside the tracks to serve as landmarks to travellers in the snowing season.
>
> This plain, whose name is Pamir, extends fully twelve days' journey. In all these twelve days there is no habitation or shelter, and travellers must take their provisions with them. No birds fly here because of the height and the cold. And I assure you that because of this great cold, fire is not so bright here nor of the same color as elsewhere, and food does not cook well.

Here, of course, Marco had noted the effect of altitude on the boiling temperature of water.

Coming down from this dramatic and dangerous area, the Polos reached the city of KASHGAR, in the present day Chinese province of XINJIANG (pronounced shin-jiang). Unfortunately, Marco's description of this area is very vague. XINJIANG, however, was a very important area, for it was through here that the ancient trading caravans travelled along the famous SILK ROAD. (see Chapter 1)

From Kashgar to Shangdu

Marco Polo does note the proper sequence of the SILK ROAD as it led into China -- YARKAND, KHOTAN, PEM, CHARCHAN and finally LOP, at the edge of the GOBI DESERT. Although his descriptions of these stops is scanty, he was quite detailed in his account of the desert. The GOBI DESERT was -- and still is -- a formidable place, and it is not surprising that it was seen as the dwelling place of ghosts and goblins. Marco Polo evidently thought so too.

> This desert is reported to be so long that it would take a year to go from end to end...it consists entirely of mountains and sands and valleys. There is nothing at all to eat...Beasts and birds there are none, because they find nothing to eat. But I assure you that one thing is found here, and that a very strange one, which I will relate to you.
>
> The truth is this. When a man is riding by night through this desert and something happens to make him loiter and lose touch with his companions, by dropping asleep or for some other reason, and afterwards he wants to rejoin them, then he hears spirits talking in such a way that they seem to be his companions. Sometimes, indeed, they even hail him by name. Often these voices make him stray from the path, so that he never finds it again...

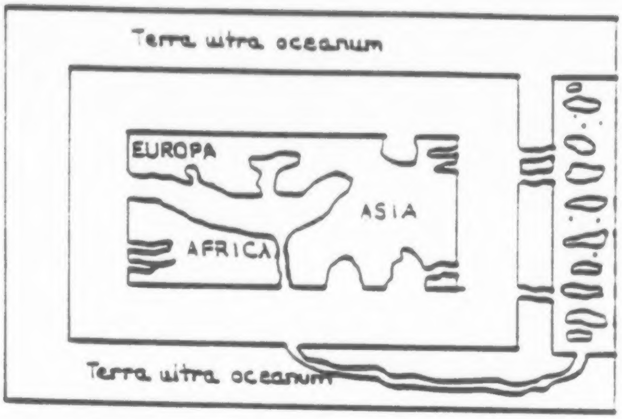
After a month of travelling through the desert, the Polos emerged at their first Chinese city, DUNHUANG. (In the early nineteenth century, a vast store of invaluable manuscripts and artworks dating back as far as the tenth century in China were unearthed in Dunhuang -- the Polos, of course, were not aware of the treasure that lay beneath their feet!) The Polos travelled from DUNHUANG through what is today the Chinese province of GANSU and finally arrived in GANZHOU, the administrative center of this province. Although Marco Polo describes the old capital of KARAKORUM, which lay to the north, the Polos probably did not go there themselves, but rather proceeded on towards the area of the YELLOW RIVER. At this point, their itinerary becomes almost impossible to trace, although they probably did stop at the city of LANZHOU on the northern bend of this great river. Surprisingly enough, Marco Polo makes no mention of the Great Wall, by far the most prominent landmark of this particular area.

The next we know of the Polos, they had arrived at the court of Kublai Khan, probably his summer palace which was located in SHANGDU near present-day DOLON-NOR, MONGOLIA. From SHANGDU, the Polos accompanied the Khan and his retinue to China, and the capital of the Mongol Empire at BEIJING.

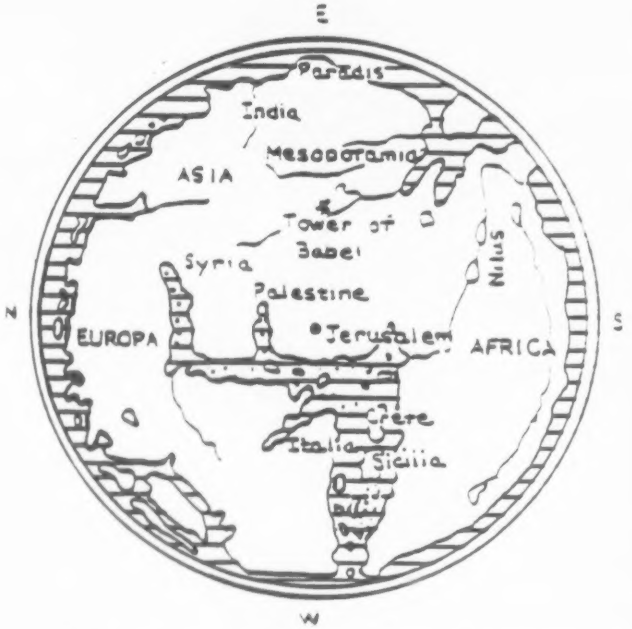
APPENDIX D

MAPS

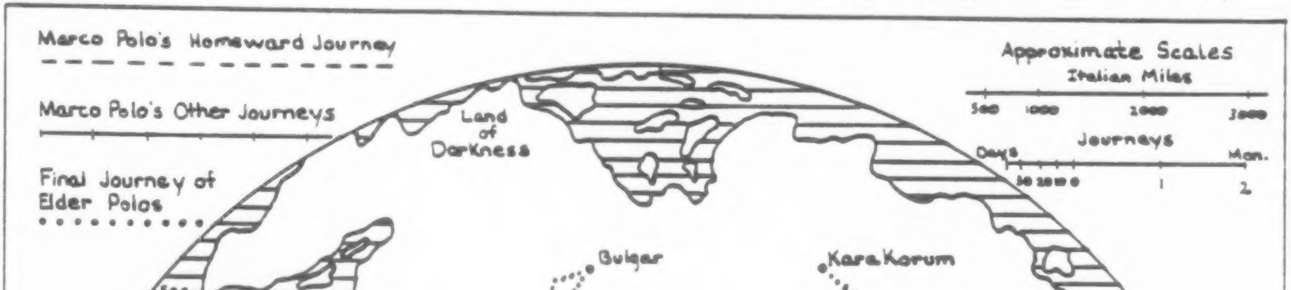
CHANGING VIEWS OF THE WORLD


Terra ultra oceanum
EUROPA
ASIA
AFRICA
Terra ultra oceanum

Map of the World – C. 535 A.D.


E
Paradis
India
Mesopotamia
ASIA
Tower of
Babel
Syria
Palestine
Nilus
N
EUROPA
Jerusalem
AFRICA
S
Crete
Italia
Sicilia
W

Map of the World – 13th Century


Marco Polo's Homeward Journey
Marco Polo's Other Journeys
Final Journey of
Elder Polos
Approximate Scales
Italian Miles
500
1000
2000
3000
Journeys
Days
Mon.
30 20 10 0
1
2
Land
of
Darkness
Bulgar
Kara Korum
Sea
of
England
Constantinople
Cambaluc
(Beijing)
Lop
Ciarchan
Pen
Cotan
Yarkan
Cascar
Samarkand
CATHAY
JAPAN
Genoa
Venice
Bokhara
Pamir Mountains
TIBET
MANZI
PERSIA
Acre
Kerman
Jerusalem
Sea of China
Alexandria
LESSER
INDIA
Mien
(Burma)
GREATER
INDIA
Champa
(Indo china)
EGYPT
7,448 Islands Producing
Aromatics
Tomb of
Adam
Java the
Great
Sea of
India
12,700 Islands
in this sea
MIDDLE INDIA
OCEAN
SEA
Midi

Map of the World – as Marco Polo might have drawn it
(reconstructed from his accounts)

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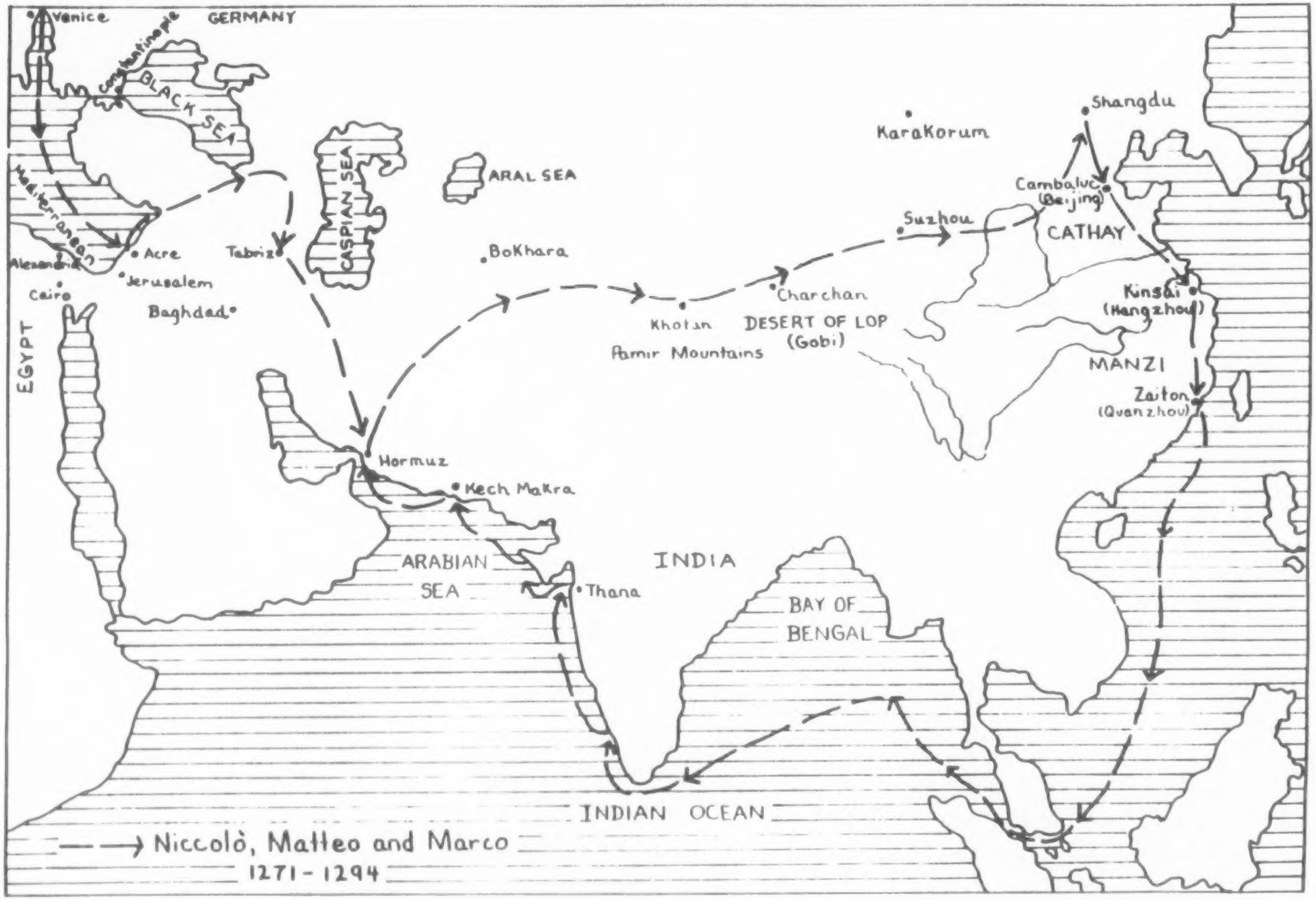
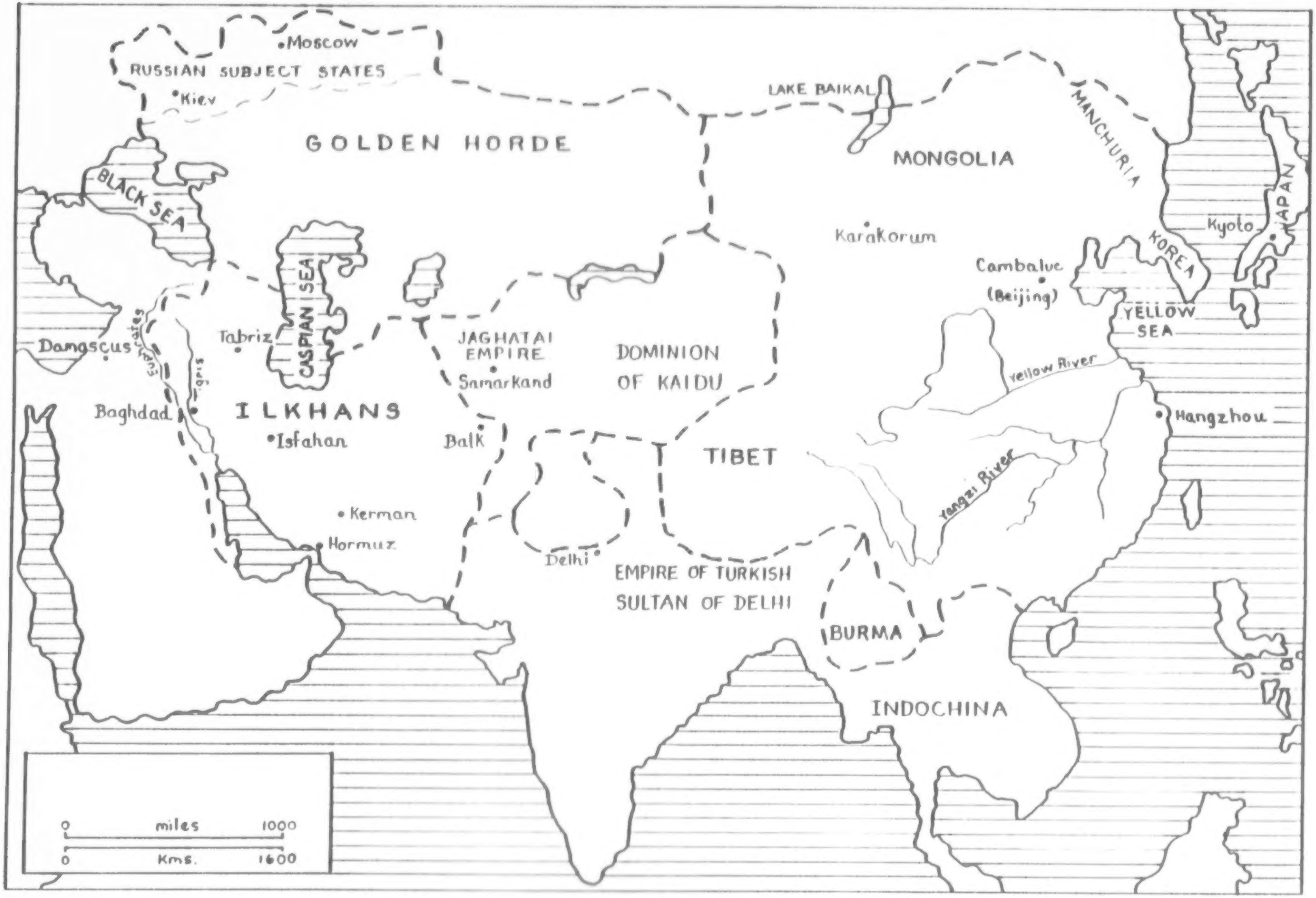
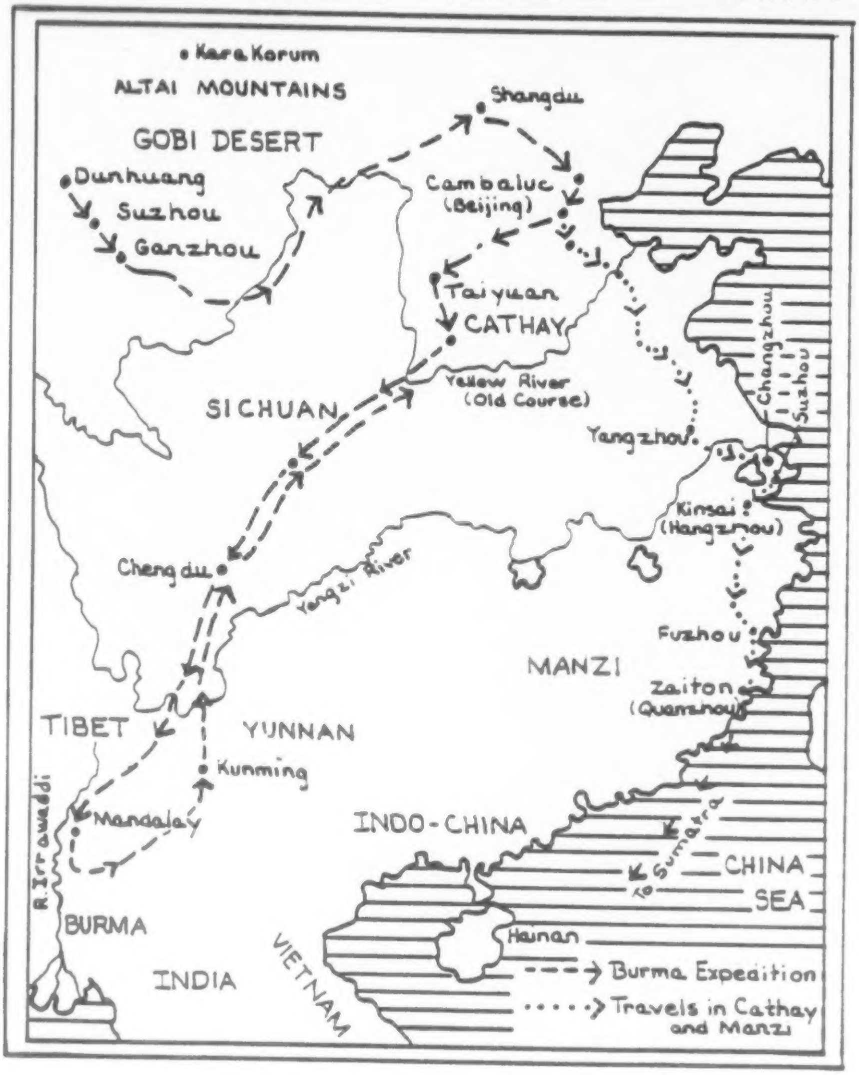
THE ROAD TO CHINA


Venice
GERMANY
Constantinople
BLACK SEA
Mediterranean
Alexandria
Cairo
Acre
Jerusalem
Baghdad
EGYPT
Tabriz
CASPIAN SEA
ARAL SEA
Bokhara
Karakorum
Shangdu
Cambaluc
(Beijing)
CATHAY
Suzhou
Charchan
Khotan
Pamir Mountains
DESERT OF LOP
(Gobi)
Kinsai
(Hangzhou)
MANZI
Zaiton
(Quanzhou)
Hormuz
Kech Makra
ARABIAN SEA
Thana
INDIA
BAY OF BENGAL
INDIAN OCEAN
→ Niccolò, Matteo and Marco
1271 - 1294

THE MONGOL EMPIRE


Moscow
RUSSIAN SUBJECT STATES
Kiev
GOLDEN HORDE
LAKE BAIKAL
MONGOLIA
MANCHURIA
BLACK SEA
Karakorum
KOREA
Kyoto
JAPAN
Cambaluc
(Beijing)
YELLOW SEA
CASPIAN SEA
Tabriz
JAGHATAI EMPIRE
Samarkand
DOMINION OF KAIDU
Damascus
Euphrates
Tigris
Yellow River
Baghdad
ILKHANS
Isfahan
Balk
TIBET
Hangzhou
Yangzi River
Kerman
Hormuz
Delhi
EMPIRE OF TURKISH SULTAN OF DELHI
BURMA
INDOCHINA
0 miles 1000
0 Kms. 1600

MARCO POLO'S TRAVELS IN CHINA


Kara Korum
ALTAI MOUNTAINS
GOBI DESERT
Shangdu
Dunhuang
Suzhou
Ganzhou
Cambaluc (Beijing)
Taiyuan
CATHAY
Yellow River (Old Course)
SICHUAN
Yangzhou
Changzhou
Suzhou
Kinsai (Hangzhou)
Chengdu
Yangzi River
Fuzhou
MANZI
Zaiton (Quanzhou)
TIBET
YUNNAN
Kunming
Mandalay
R. Irrawaddi
INDO-CHINA
to Sumatra
CHINA SEA
BURMA
Hainan
INDIA
VIETNAM
Burma Expedition
Travels in Cathay and Manzi

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APPENDIX E

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1: MAP-MAKING

Objectives

Students will:

- -- learn the major physical features of Europe and Asia
- -- chart the route which Marco Polo travelled as well as the ancient Silk Routes
- -- experience the difficulties of accurate map-making
- -- examine the differing perceptions of the world by geographers of the 12th and 20th centuries
- -- learn some ways in which humans adapt to their environment

Materials needed

Atlases
Globes
Maps and text included in this guide (see pp. 78-81)

Procedure

1. Students create their own world map*

   a. After making sure no maps are in view, ask students to quickly sketch a general map of the world by using basic geometric shapes, i.e., circles, squares, triangles, etc. Older students can sketch free-hand. Younger students can be provided shapes cut from construction paper.
   b. Have them compare their maps with a correct version and identify where their perceptions of relative positions and sizes were hazy or incorrect.
   c. Students should then "reshape" their maps to the view of Marco Polo (See p. 78 for his view.)

2. Students create their own 8½" x 11" outline map of Europe and Asia, using an atlas as a reference. Include the following features:

   a. latitude lines (equator to 80 degrees North)
   b. longitude lines (Prime Meridian to 180 degrees)
   c. major bodies of water
   d. mountain ranges

3. At this point, the teacher should make several copies of the student drawn maps. They will be used to create the following two maps.

4. Using one copy of their outline map, students create a historical map of Europe and Asia during the 13th century, including the following:

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*This activity is adapted from an exercise developed by A. Elgin Heinz, and published in Opening Doors: Contemporary Japan (New York: Asia Society, 1979), p. 124.

   a. routes - The Silk Road; Marco Polo's travels inside the Mongol Empire; his overall route from Italy to China (see p. 79).
   b. Muslim and Christian Worlds

5. Using another copy of their outline map, students create their own physical map of Chingis Khan's Mongol Empire (see p. 80). Include the following:

   a. Borders with adjacent political states labeled
   b. Separate nations/states conquered by Chingis Khan
   c. Most important natural resources

Discussion Questions

1. What kinds of foods would Marco Polo and his companions have eaten at any given place? (Be specific: if you say "camel meat" then indicate at which points along the way such food would have been available. Be prepared to defend your findings.)

2. Where would he have worn clothing and where might he have worn very little? (Be sure to take into account the time of year--if that detail is available.)

3. What were the different languages and dialects which he encountered?

4. Had he been the sort of traveller that we 20th century travellers tend to be: what souvenirs (e.g. local artifacts) might he have picked up along the way?

ACTIVITY 2: CHANGING VIEW OF THE WORLD

Objectives

Students will:

-- locate and identify legendary and Biblical sites considered authentic by Medieval geographers and Marco Polo.

-- contrast three progressive Medieval geographic images of the world.

-- evaluate the contributions to Medieval geographic knowledge which resulted from Marco Polo's travels.

Materials needed

A copy of the three Medieval maps (see p. 78)
A copy of the Epilogue in Discovering Marco Polo, particularly the sec- on Marco Polo's influence on geography.

Preparations

Make a copy of the three Medieval maps (p. 78) for each student.
Make a copy of the Epilogue for each student.

Procedure

Ask students to complete the following homework assignment based on the three maps and the Epilogue.

1. Locate these four geographic terms on all three maps: (1) Europe, (2) Asia, (3) Africa, (4) Mediterranean Sea. How are they similar, how different? How does the geographic image change from one map to the next?

2. Locate bodies of water on all three maps. How does the relation of land and water change from map to map?

3. Each geographer drew a map centered on a different geographic place. Locate the center of each map and account for the changes from one map to the next.

4. In the thirteenth century, most educated Europeans no longer believed that the world was flat. However, their image of the world included a mixture of accurate and inaccurate facts. List legendary sites on the "Map of the World--13th Century." List legendary sites on the map that comes from Marco Polo's accounts. Compare the two lists.

5. Despite the new geographical knowledge gained from his travels, Marco Polo continued to accept Biblical places as authentic. List Biblical sites on Marco Polo's map. List Biblical sites on the "Map of the World--13th Century." Compare the two lists.

6. Examine Marco Polo's map again. What is the relationship of Asia, Africa, and Europe? What is the center of the map? How did Marco Polo's description of Asia prepare other European travellers? What contributions did his accounts make to European geographic knowledge?

ACTIVITY 3: USING PRIMARY SOURCES: FOUR VIEWS OF BEIJING

Objectives

Students will:

-- read eyewitness descriptions of Beijing written by four 13th and 14th century visitors--deduce the nationality, occupation, religion, and historical era of each traveller

-- match the primary source with its author based on "evidence" found in each reading

-- describe one author's "perception" in light of the following quotation: "...The things we observe about a particular culture are influenced by who we are, where we come from, what we are looking for and what we expect to find."

Materials needed

Primary Source Readings A-D (see pp. 87-88)
Student Worksheets (see p. 86)
Answer Key (see pp. 89-90)

Procedure

Day One

1. List on the board names and occupations of the authors of readings A-D as reference points for the students.

2. Divide the class into 4 groups.

3. Distribute Primary Source Readings (one per group) and 1 worksheet for each student.

4. Each group works together to answer the questions which are filled in by each student.

5. Each group chooses a "reader" to read the Primary Source material and a second person to explain the group's answers to the class.

6. After the group's presentation, the answer key is shared with the class.

Day Two

1. Read the quotation above and discuss the following questions with the entire class.

   a. What do all of these accounts have in common? What are the differences? What can a person learn about 13th century city life in China from these accounts?

   b. Find a present-day travel guide to the People's Republic of China; compare and contrast the description of Beijing and the Forbidden City with these earlier ones.

STUDENT HANDOUT

PRIMARY SOURCE WORKSHEET

Name of Narrator ______________________ Nationality ____________________

Occupation ___________________________ Era ___________________________

1. Make a hypothesis (i.e.,educated guess) to explain why this person travelled to China and what he wanted to discover?

2. What evidence is reported in the reading that would lead you to make such a decision?

3. Why did the author choose these facts to relate to his readers?

4. What generalizations (conclusions) can you make about the author's perception of China?

Primary Source A

Cathay (China) is a province which contains a multitude of cities and towns. Among others there is one in particular, that is to say the capital city, to which is a great resort of merchants, and in which there is a vast amount of trade; and this city is called Cambaluc (Beijing). And the said city hath a circuit of one hundred miles, and is all full of people and houses and of dwellers in the said city.

You may calculate that a merchant with a dragoman, and with two men servants, and with goods to the value of twenty-five thousand gold florins, should spend on his way to Cathay from sixty to eighty sommi of silver, and not more if he manage well; and for all the road back again from Cathay to Tana, including the expenses of living and the pay of servants, and all other charges, the cost will be about five sommi per head of pack animals, or something less.

The road you travel from Tana to Cathay is perfectly safe, whether by day or by night, according to what the merchants say who have used it. Only if the merchant, in going or coming, should die upon the road, everything which belongs to him will become the perquisite of the lord of the country in which he dies, and the officers of the lord will take possession of all. And in like manner if he dies in Cathay. But if his brother be with him, or an intimate friend and comrade calling himself his brother, then to such a one they will surrender the property of the deceased, and so it will be rescued.

Primary Source B

As regards the regions of the East, and especially the empires of the Lord Khan, I give you to know that there is none greater in the world. And I have a place in the Khan's court, and a regular entrance and seat assigned me as legate of our Lord the Pope, and the Khan honors me above all prelates, whatever be their titles. And although his majesty the Khan has heard much about the court of Rome, and the state of the Latin world, he desires greatly to see envoys arriving from those regions.

Here are many sects of idolaters holding various beliefs; and here also are many persons attached to religious orders of different sects, and wearing different habits; and these practice greater abstinence and austerity than our Latin monks.

I have built a church in the city of Cambaluc (Beijing), in which the king has his chief residence. This I completed six years ago; and I have built a bell-tower to it, and put three bells in it. I have baptized there, as well as I can estimate, up to this time some 6,000 persons.

Primary Source C

On the banks of a great river in the province of Cathay (North China) there stood an ancient city of great splendor which was named Cambaluc, that is to say in our language, 'the Lord's city'. Now the Great Khan discovered through his astrologers that this city would rebel and put up a stubborn resistance against the Empire. For this reason he had this new city built next to the old one, with only the river between.

This city...is built in the form of a square with all its sides of equal length and a total circumference of twenty-five miles. It is enclosed by earthen ramparts, twenty paces high and ten paces thick at the base.... They are all battlemented and white washed. They have twelve gates, each surmounted by a fine, large palace. So on each of the four sides there are three gates and five palaces, because there is an additional palace at each corner. In these palaces there are immense halls, which house the weapons of the city.

I assure you that the streets are so broad and straight that from the top of the wall above one gate you can see the whole length of the road to the gate opposite. The city is full of fine mansions, inns, and dwelling houses. All the way down the sides of every main street there are booths and shops of every sort.

In this city there is such a multitude of houses and of people, both within the walls and without, that no one could count their number. Actually, there are more people outside the walls in the suburbs than in the city itself.

You must know that no one who dies is buried in the city. If an idolater dies there, his body is taken to the place of cremation, which lies outside the suburbs.

Primary Source D

And thus at last we arrived at Cambaluc (Beijing)....It is the capital of the Khan or great Emperor, who rules over China. We moored, according to the custom of these people, ten miles short of Cambaluc, and they sent a report of our arrival to the admirals, who gave us permission to enter the port, and this we did. At last we landed at the city, which is one of the greatest in the world, and differs from all the other cities of China in having no gardens inside the walls; they are all outside, as in other countries. The city or quarter in which the emperor resides stands in the middle like a citadel, as we shall tell hereafter. I took up my quarters with the Sheik Burhanuddin of Sagharaj, the individual to whom the Sultan of India sent 40,000 dinars, with an invitation to go to his dominions. He took the money indeed, and paid his debts with it, but declined to go to the King of Delhi, and directed his course toward China. The Khan put him at the head of all the Muslims in his empire, with the title of Dasr-ul-Jihan, or Chief of the World.

Answer Key:

PRIMARY SOURCE A

Name Pegolotti Nationality Italian

Occupation Merchant Era 14th Century

1. This person travelled to China to open up trade with Chinese merchants.
2. He mentioned that the capital city was a "great resort of merchants" and had a "vast amount of trade"; he discussed the costs of travel and trade; and he talked about ownership of possessions/merchandise upon one's death.
3. He obviously was a merchant, who was interested in trade and who wanted to report to other merchants.
4. He was impressed with China's size, wealth, and potential for trade.

PRIMARY SOURCE B

Name Friar John de Monte Corvino Nationality Italian

Occupation Franciscan Missionary Era 14th Century

1. This person travelled to China as a representative of the Pope to establish a church and convert the Chinese to Christianity.
2. He explicitly states that he was a legate of the Pope and that he had built a church in Cambaluc.
3. Obviously, as a religious leader he wanted to report on his work in China and the religious conditions therein.
4. This person considered China to be the greatest empire of the world and the home of many "idolaters" because they had religious beliefs different than his own. But, he had a certain admiration for the local religious leaders because they practiced great abstinence and austerity.

Answer Key: (continued)

PRIMARY SOURCE C

Name Marco Polo Nationality Venetian/Italian

Occupation Merchant/Adventurer/Missionary Era 13th Century

1. It is difficult to determine why this person travelled to China. He seems to be an adventurer interested in reporting on what he saw.

2. He did not discuss one aspect of life that would allow us to pinpoint his occupation. He offered a superficial survey of the city.

3. He pointed out the general physical aspects of the city much as a newspaper reporter writing a travel article. He tried to relate these things to a general audience of readers.

4. He was favorably impressed with China.

PRIMARY SOURCE D

Name Ibn Battuta Nationality Arab (Country Unknown)

Occupation Traveller Era 14th Century

1. We are not exactly sure why this person travelled to China. Perhaps he was on a mission with Burhanuddin of Sagharaj to rule over Muslims in China.

2. He reported on Muslims in China and stated that he "took up quarters" with Burhanuddin. The Khan placed Burhanuddin over all the Muslims in his empire.

3. The author, seemingly, wrote to Muslims somewhere in the Muslim world.

4. He was favorably impressed with the capital city, which he termed "one of the greatest in the world."

ACTIVITY 4: USING THE TV MINISERIES: CREATIVE WRITING AND DISCUSSION

Objectives

Students will watch the "Marco Polo" miniseries and write and/or prepare an oral presentation using the following techniques:

-- narrate the travels and impressions of a thirteenth century European or Mongol

-- describe historical data provided in the miniseries

-- evaluate Marco Polo and other thirteenth century accounts as primary sources: what is included, what is excluded and why?

-- prepare a group presentation in which each member describes a city from a different perspective

Materials

Discovering Marco Polo text
Maps or photos of a familiar city
Thesaurus and/or dictionary
Optional: Marco Polo (the novel based on the TV script, see Bibliography, "B".)

Preparation

Before class, read the Discovering Marco Polo text and watch the Marco Polo miniseries. The teacher may also want to assign parts of Discovering Marco Polo for student reading.

Suggested Activities

1. Watch Marco Polo miniseries.

2. Write a diary (daily or weekly) pretending you are one of the following people.

   a. Marco Polo
   b. Chingis Khan
   c. Niccolo Polo on his second trip
   d. A Mongol nomad
   e. A travelling silk merchant
   f. A Chinese scholar living in Beijing under Mongol Rule
   g. A Missionary going to China to convert the non-Christian to Christianity
   h. Other - choose your own (with teacher approval)

3. Pretend you are members of Marco Polo's party - or Marco Polo himself. Write a letter to someone in Venice. The letter could be addressed to a wife, a parent, a friend, a son or daughter. Describe some of your experiences.

   You may be tempted to tell only the best or the scariest parts, and even to embroider them a bit - feel free. This is a creative writing - though it still must rest on a firm historical basis.

4. In a small group, choose a familiar nearby city (or foreign country, if possible). Each student should describe this city/country from a different perspective -- for example, a businessperson, a newspaper reporter, a government official, a visitor from a foreign country, a sports star, a religious leader, etc. Compare the accounts. How are they the same? How are they different? Why?

5. Two students should separately prepare two descriptions of the same city: one as a member of the community and one as an outsider. Compare and contrast the descriptions.

6. Marco Polo is reported to have said that in his book he had told only "one-half of what he had seen." How do you think he chose what to tell and what to leave out? Why? Who was his audience? Does who you are telling a story to affect how you tell it?

7. Describe a trip you have taken or something special you have seen to various kinds of people such as: a) parents, b) a girl/boy you would like to impress, c) a person from a foreign country -- say China -- who had never been there, and d) someone you know who will not believe you anyway, etc.

8. Marco Polo apparently did not speak Chinese. Also, he was a high official in the court of the Mongol Khan at a time when Chinese were excluded from high office. How do you think this affected what he saw in China? What would you see if you went to a foreign country and spoke the language of that country? What would you miss if you did not speak the language?

9. Marco Polo knew a considerable amount about Mongolian history and culture because he knew the language and also his father and uncle taught him a great deal. But, he knew very little about Chinese culture and civilization. How do you think this affected what he saw? What difference does it make if you know something about a country before you go there? Do you compare it to what you have seen in your own country? If it is really different, how do you think you would react?

ACTIVITY 5: USING THE TV MINISERIES: UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL FICTION

Objectives

Students will:

-- identify important influences on novel, movie, and television treatments of historical events

-- understand that even objective documentaries reveal a certain bias of the people making the film

-- understand that historical dramas are even more problematic since writers create a story around the basic historical facts

Materials

Excerpts from Directors and Actors' comments on making the miniseries (see pp. 94-95)

Cast of Characters (pp. 65-69)

Introduction (see pp. i-v)

Optional: Marco Polo (the novel based on the TV script, see Bibliography "B")

Preparations

Watch the Marco Polo miniseries
Make copies of the above materials for each student

Procedure

Answer the following questions based on the TV show and the information that is found in the materials listed above.

1. Why do you think the director decided to make this film? Have you seen other films on Marco Polo? What were they like? Were they filmed in China? Does filming it on location make a difference? What kind of difference?

2. Which characters in the TV series are based on historical people? Which appear not to be? Why do you think the fictional characters were created? How do they change the story? How do they add to the story? Is there a difference between recreating authentic physical settings and creating fictional characters?

3. In Episode Two, Marco goes to a Tibetan monastery where he learns the value of meditation. Actually the Tibetan monasteries at that time practiced magical rituals which Marco Polo called "works of the Devil"; it was only in India on his way home to Venice that Marco Polo notice the Yogis and their ascetic practices and recorded the story of Buddha. Although he never mentions it, Marco could have learned meditation. Why do you think the director emphasized this?

4. What was the audience this movie was aimed at? Does this make a difference in what the director chose to emphasize?

5. What is the impression of Kublai Khan you get from this movie? Does he seem Chinese to you? Mongol? How can you tell the difference between the Chinese and the Mongols? (Since the show is all in English, you cannot tell by the language they speak.)

6. According to this movie, what was Venice like in the 13th century? What was China like? What were the differences?

Excerpt from Giuliano Montaldo, Director of the TV Miniseries*

Q: Why did you want to make this film?

A: The name Marco Polo is linked with fancy, with travel, adventure, longing to know new things and understand the world. His name is also a symbol of peace. He was different from other Italian travellers, like Columbus, whose voyages led to aggression and conquests.

At present, China is a center of world attention, and Marco Polo as a natural subject for a film with the theme of friendship. His adventures have been put on screen before, but never in China, where they really took place. We wanted to shoot in China, for which we needed and got the cooperation of the Chinese Ministry of Culture and the China Film Co-Production Corporation.

We want our picture to reflect history as it really was. Marco Polo travelled through many countries, and our company has gone on location in Europe, Asia and Africa. We have constructed many sets, plus a huge quantity of costumes, weapons and other props. We hope these tremendous efforts will make our film a success.

Two things are sure to arouse the interest of people around the world: first, Marco Polo and second, China. We are confident of making a fine film which will be enjoyed by both adults and children.

Excerpt from Ken Marshall, the American who portrayed Marco Polo

Q: What do you like most about the film?

A: From the rushes we've seen so far, it looks so real. What Marco described has been recreated for the screen. The scenery, the sets, costumes, armor, all the details are authentic. The whole production has a look of truth. And the camera work is done with such style and beauty.

Q: You've travelled in three countries making the picture -- Italy, Morocco and China. What impressed you most about each?

A: For all of them, I'd have to say the people. Perhaps because I'm an actor, I like to observe people -- why they do what they do, how they live, how they're different from me, or similar. I've found it's very easy for people, just on a one-to-one basis, to like and help one another. Reading newspapers about conflicts and problems between countries, you wonder how their people could ever like each other. But you get people together, working on something like a film or a sports meet -- something good and meaningful -- and they have no problems.

Most people are so isolated, they don't get to travel. All they have in their heads is the negative things they read in newspapers, because negative things are what get reported. I wish more people could travel, and see for themselves. (Excerpt continued on following page).

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* Adapted from China Reconstructs (April, 1982), pp. 24-33. Two articles on the TV miniseries are found in this issue.

I like to think Marco Polo felt the same way. His book, you know, is full of all the people and things he saw, but very little about himself -- it's not "I, I, I" the way it is with some modern writers. In part, that's the age in which he lived, but I also think he was a particular kind of person. He was tremendously interested in the people he met, their fascinatingly different ways of life. He didn't force himself or his ideas on other people. And, of course, if people see that you're really interested in them, they'll accept you much more readily.

Excerpt from Ying Ruocheng, the Chinese actor who portrayed Kublai Khan

On the Story

Marco Polo acted as a bridge between the Europe of his day and the Chinese civilization about which Europeans then knew virtually nothing. His Travels of Marco Polo, which has enchanted hundreds of millions of readers since it was first written, is more than a great adventure story. It helped break through the shackles on thinking in late Medieval Europe and shed a gleam of light into the relatively dark age. Through this book, Europeans learned for the first time about China's invention of printing, gunpowder and the compass, that "black rocks" (coal) could be used as fuel, and that rich and complex civilizations existed far from Europe.

The book also helped inspire Columbus and other explorers who in the 15th and 16th centuries sought new routes between Europe and Asia. Columbus' own copy of the book, with many notes in his handwriting, is now preserved in a museum in Italy.

The young Marco left his home in Venice at 17 to accompany his merchant father and uncle to China. There he won the trust of Kublai Khan, ruler of China's Yüan dynasty (1271-1368) and was appointed an official of the court. The greater part of our film, like Marco's book, concentrates on his 17-year stay in China, but we also show the European world to which he returned and how he tried to tell his tale. Captured in a war between the city-states of Venice and Genoa, Marco was put in a Genoese prison, where he dictated his memoirs to a fellow-prisoner named Rusticello. At first the sober truths he had to tell about China seemed like fairy tales to many Europeans: he was mocked as a liar on a grand scale....

On the Production

As Marco Polo is historically based and everyone involved was concerned about accuracy in costumes, settings and so on, questions were continually being raised and then settled through discussion and consultation. As most of the story was set in China, we Chinese had a great deal to say on these points. Italian producer, Vincenzo Labella, has said that the Chinese specialists, scholars and filmmakers who worked with him contributed a great deal to the truthfulness of the film.

And of course working in China, often at the very sites Marco Polo wrote about, added immeasurably to the authenticity of our scenes.

APPENDIX F

BIBLIOGRAPHY

I. Additional Background Reading

A. The Travels of Marco Polo translated by R.E. Lantham
(Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958)

Lantham's translation is the standard one in use and the passages quoted in this teacher's guide are taken from it. It is available in most bookstores.

B. Marco Polo by Keith Miles and David Butler
(New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1982)

This is the novel based upon NBC's Marco Polo miniseries screenplay. It is widely available.

C. Marco Polo by Richard Humble
(London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson Publishers, 1975)

Humble offers a very readable, scholarly study of Marco Polo, his journey, and the things he saw. Numerous illustrations and photos are included.

D. The Book of Marco Polo, Vols. 1 and 2 by Sir Henry Yule
(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903)

Yule provides a voluminous and serious scholarly analysis of the Travels of Marco Polo as well as material pertinent to the understanding of the book.

E. East Asia: The Great Tradition by Edwin O. Reischauer and John K. Fairbank
(Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958 and 1960)

This basic college-level text contains a readable anecdotal survey of China during the Yüan Dynasty period.

II. Additional Curricular Materials

A. Secondary Level (Middle School and High School)

Marco Polo in China

This is a unit on Marco Polo's visit to China, including primary source readings and historical background on Western and Chinese history of the time. A teacher's guide is included.

Price: $1.50

City of Cathay - film guide

This is a guide to a film suggested for use with the Marco Polo unit listed above.

*Note: Both of these items can be obtained from the following source:

East Asian Curriculum Project
East Asian Institute
Columbia University
420 West 118th Street
New York, New York 10027

B. Middle School Level

Travel with Marco Polo: Life in 13th Century China

This is a unit of class activities based on a kit of artifacts, including student readings and slides, designed to familiarize students with China in the 13th century. A student's guide and teacher's guide is included. This unit can be adapted up or down, and the readings in the student's guide can stand on their own without the slides or artifacts.

Price: $10.00 for the two guides
$66.00 for the slides
$250.00 for the artifacts

Available from: CHINESE ETHNIC HERITAGE STUDIES COMMITTEE
Greater Boston Chinese Cultural Association
P.O. Box 142
Newton Center, Massachusetts 02159

C. Primary School Level

Marco Polo by Gian Paolo Ceserani, illustrated by Piero Ventura

This is a delightful book that offers a simple text and beautiful drawings to tell Marco Polo's story and describes what he saw on his journey.

Price: $6.95

Available from: G.P. Putnam's Sons
200 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10016

STANFORD PROGRAM ON INTERNATIONAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION

SPICE

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Background

The Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education (SPICE) represents a long-term effort by Stanford University to improve international and cross-cultural education in elementary and secondary schools. The program traces its origins to 1973 with the initiation of the Bay Area China Education Project, an effort to upgrade teaching about the People's Republic of China. Subsequently, parallel projects on Japan, Africa, Latin America, International Security and Arms Control, Western Europe, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were established, and together with the China Project, became the nucleus of SPICE. SPICE also offers services in the fields of geography and foreign language.

In 1979, SPICE joined with two other international resource organizations–The World Affairs Council of Northern California and Global Educators–to form the Bay Area Global Education Program (BAGEP), an international studies resource consortium serving K-12 schools and districts in the San Francisco area. In 1986, Stanford University, in cooperation with the World Affairs Council and Global Educators, was selected to manage the California International Studies Project (CISP), a legislatively-based (AB 2543) statewide network of international resource centers for which BAGEP serves as a model. SPICE is the curriculum development and materials resource arm of CISP.

Sponsorship

SPICE is sponsored by the Institute for International Studies and the School of Education at Stanford University.

Sources of Support

SPICE receives support from federal sources, private foundations, and the Institute for International Studies.

Current Programs and Priorities

SPICE's current curricular priority is the development of lessons which enhance the study of world history, cultures and geography. In the area of staff development, SPICE's priority is to provide support for the programs of the CISP Resource Centers. SPICE also has ongoing staff development efforts through each of its individual projects, and is centrally involved in a summer institute on the Stanford campus in conjunction with BAGEP.

Within the range of its existing project, SPICE will provide consultation in the development of international studies programs for elementary and secondary education on a fee for service basis.

Major Emphases

SPICE emphasizes curriculum and staff development and offers a wide variety of teaching materials and staff development programs. SPICE has strong interests in the development of university-based international studies centers, and program evaluation.

Publication of Teaching Materials

SPICE offers over 60 titles which include curriculum units, resource guides, and research reports. Write to SPICE for a free catalogue.